Marie Bigot was an excellent pianist and performed concerts publicly as well as in the semi-public setting of musical salons. Due to her husband’s employment in Count Rasumovsky’s household she met Joseph Haydn and Ludwig van Beethoven. The latter was a frequent guest with the Bigot family. He may have taught Marie Bigot, who frequently learned his latest compositions and is said to have performed the “Appassionata” from the autograph.

Her activity as piano pedagogue, which she probably began in Vienna, had to be continued at an increased level in Paris, since, due to her husband’s incarceration during Napoleon’s Russia campaign, she had to earn a living for herself and the two children.

Her contemporaries described Marie Bigot as an adept composer. Unfortunately, only very few of her compositions have been found so far.

Cities and countries

Marie Bigot first worked in Vienna, where she campaigned publicly and semi-publicly for Beethoven’s works. After relocating to Paris in 1809 she became an early supporter of the works of the Viennese School as well as Johann Sebastian Bach.

Biography

Anne Marie Cathérine Kiené was born 3 March 1786 in Colmar. She had her first piano lessons with her mother Marie-Catherine Kiené and followed most likely by other instructors. In 1791, the family moved to Neuchâtel in Switzerland. There she spent her youth and met Berlin-born Huguenot, Paul Bigot de Morogues, whom she married in 1804. The marriage undoubtedly meant a social climb for the commoner. The couple moved to Vienna in the same year where Paul Bigot took up a post as librarian to music-loving Count Andrej K. Razumovsky. In the Count’s salon, Marie Bigot got to know Joseph Haydn, Antonio Salieri and Ludwig van Beethoven, whose oeuvre she supported early on. Aside from the probably semi-public performances in the Razumovsky household, Marie Bigot also performed several public concerts in Vienna. Beethoven was a frequent guest in the Bigot household where Marie Bigot played the “Appassionata” from the autograph for him. It is not known whether she received piano lessons from him but it is a possibility. A number of letters from Beethoven to Marie Bigot and her husband suggest that Beethoven was attracted to Marie Bi-
got. During the Napoleonic Wars the Bigot family moved to Paris in 1809. Having “played a significant role” (“eine ziemliche Rolle gespielt” in Pohl, 1927, p.239.), in Vienna’s cultural life, the Bigots continued these activities in Paris. Their house became a cultural rendezvous point.

Marie Bigot, together with violinist Pierre Baillot and cellist Jacques Michel Hurel de Lamare, started campaigning for the distribution of Beethoven’s pianistic and chamber musical works in Paris very early on. Works of the Viennese School very likely also dominated her teaching work, which she had to take up due to her husband’s imprisonment in Russia. Amongst her most famous students were Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy in 1816. Marie Bigot died on 16 September 1820 at the age of 34 of a lung disease, probably tuberculosis. In addition to her pianistic activities, she had already started composing in Vienna where a piano sonata was published as op. 1 and an “Andante varié” (op. 2).

A selection of études was later published in Paris. While Marie Bigot’s pianistic career concentrated strongly on Beethoven, her piano sonata attests her reception of Mozart’s works; in contrast, her études already show romantic values of expression.

There is a memorial plaque on a house in Rue des Marchands number 48 in Colmar: It commemorates Marie Bigot de Morogues. She was born here on 3 March 1786 and christened Anne Marie Cathérine Kiéné. Both her parents were musicians; her father was a violinist, her mother a pianist. Her father, Joseph Kiéné, was born in 1749 and is a descendant of the Rouffach family. Joseph Kiéné moved to Colmar in search of students, where he met the shoe maker Mathias Leyer, who was well-known for his love of music, and married the latter’s daughter Marie-Cathérine in 1785 (see Perreau, 1962, pp.59-67). In 1791 the young family left Colmar to move to Neuchâtel in Switzerland. At that time, Neuchâtel was a well-known musical centre, due to its Académie de Musique, founded in 1754, whose orchestra was mostly formed by aristocratic amateurs with the occasional addition of professional middle-class musicians. Following various positions in musical societies, that included concert organisation, Joseph Kiéné took up a post as violinist in the Neuchâtel orchestra in 1801 and became vice president of the neighbouring Société de Musique.

According to articles in the relevant lexicons Marie Bigot received her first piano lessons from her mother. Given the musical ambient in Neuchâtel it is very likely that other tutors were involved. In any case, it seems that her first public performances took place when she was only 16 years old. An announcement dated 29 December 1801 by the concert committee that supports young artists states the following: “Le comité voulant seconder les vues de M. le Directeur pour l’encouragement des jeunes artistes, en travaillant à l’agrément de nos concerts en même temps, a accueilli la proposition faite d’inviter Mlle Kiéné l’aînée et d’autres, s’il y a lieu, en priant M. le Directeur de leur parvenir, dans ce cas, une honêteté.” (in Fallet, 1948, p.420; “The committee, wishing to second the director’s intention to support young talent, is working towards authorisation of our concerts and has accepted the suggestion to invite Mademoiselle Koené, the elder, and others. Should the concerts take place we request the director’s agreement.”)

It has not been possible to verify whether the planned concert actually took place, however, the statement quoted implies that Marie Bigot’s parents didn’t intend for her to become a housewife only, but had ambitions towards her public performances.

Her marriage to Paul Bigot de Morogues, 18 years her senior, in 1804 undoubtedly marked a social advancement, as he is descended from Breton nobility who fled France for Prussian Berlin to escape the persecution of Huguenots. Paul Bigot’s presence in Neuchâtel might have been linked to a diplomatic mission commissioned by the Berlin court. The marriage is attested as follows in the registry office in Neuchâtel: “Le 9 dit [juillet 1804] M. Du Pasquier a béní le mariage de M. Paul Bigot, âgé de 36 ans, natif de Berlin, fils de M. Louis Bigot de Morogues et de dame Elisabeth d’Arnaud, avec Marie, âgée de 18 ans, fille de Joseph Kuené de Ruffach en Alsace, musicien, habitant, et de Catherine Leyer.” (“On the ninth of this month Monsieur Du Pasquier married Monsieur Paul Bigot, aged 36, born in Berlin, son of Monsieur Louis Bigot de Morogues and Dame Elisabeth d’Arnaud, to Marie, aged 18, daughter of Joseph Kuené from Ruffach in Alsace, musician, citizen, and Catherine Leyer.”; in Fallet, 1948, p.420)

The entry highlights the class-oriented thinking that characterised social status at the time, since Paul Bigot’s parents are addressed as “Monsieur” and “Dame”, while Marie’s parents, in accordance with their middle-class status, are addressed by their names only. The young couple moved to Vienna the same year, where Paul Bigot took up a position as librarian with Count Razumovsky, who had been the Russian ambassador there since 1792. As Johann Friedrich Reichardt reports in his “Intimate Letters” (“Vertrauten Briefen”), they lived in the Russian diplomat’s palace: “One fine morning I took a walk to the
distant, large, princely estate of Count Razumovsky [...]. I missed the count himself finding only Madame Bigot, whose husband as the count’s librarian has a decent apartment within the count’s extensive buildings like all the artists and scholars attached to him do, surrounded by her two lovely children to whom she appears to be a caring and tender mother as any such house-wife should be. It is no small accomplishment that she mastered such great talent to such extend as she has mastered the piano forte and possess multiple pleasant, praised, female talents. She was kind enough to let me hear several felicitous Haydn and Mozart sonatas exercised with much tenderness and true perfection and promised me for the near future an entire musical evening in her beautiful, light apartment. Then, I shall hear her perform the greater works of her tutor Beethoven on the piano forte.” (in Gugitz, 1915, pp.230-231) This short but meaningful report by Reichardt accurately describes Marie Bigot’s musical skills and in addition portraits her character as a person. In any case, the Bigots were part of the lively social and cultural life that dominated the count’s palace despite the adverse political situation during the Napoleonic Wars. This is where Marie Bigot met Joseph Haydn, Antonio Salieri, and of course, Ludwig van Beethoven, who was a frequent guest and supported by the Russian diplomat with composition commissions. Andrey Kirillovich Razumovsky (1752-1836), himself an accomplished violinist, who already had friendly contact with Haydn and Mozart, became friends with Beethoven in 1796 and encouraged him to create a new quartet series, the three quartet op. 59, which realised themes of Russian songs. According to Reichardt’s report, Marie Bigot referred to Beethoven as her tutor. However, currently available sources reveal nothing about the kind of tuition. The question remains open for the time being: whether Marie Bigot received regular lessons from Beethoven or whether he only tutored her with regards to interpretation of his works. It is, however, verified that Marie Bigot supported Beethoven’s works in private circles as well as publicly. The musical soirée she promised Reichardt is described by him in detail: “Of all the big and small pieces that I’ve heard in the last days, and that I could fill sheet after sheet with, were I to name or even describe them all to you because music lives and weaves everything here, I have to especially mention a very pleasant evening at Madame Bigot’s to you. She organised it as a favour to me to let me hear the great Beethoven sonatas and trios that I recently spoke of with great sympathy to her [...] Madame Bigot had invited the violinist Schuppanzigh whose extraordinary talent is never more perfectly and more distinctively expressed than in performing Beethoven’s works. He accompanied the virtuoso’s play that evening with all his finesse and picante originality. She expertly played five of Beethoven’s great sonatas; each more magnificent than the last; it was the abundance of artistic life in full bloom. In all things there is a stream of fantasy, a deepness of emotion, for which there are no words, only sounds that can only come into the heart and from the heart of an artist who lives his art entirely and waking dreams with her and dreaming wakes. A small, rather select society around a round tea table enjoyed every sound deeply. [...] These are the most blessed hours art can give. Even though other, larger events and gatherings move and lift spirit and fantasy more mightily, these fill the heart most surely and merge it lovingly with fantasy so that both become one and allow a heartfelt uplifting existence.” (in Gugitz, 1915, pp. 269-270) Reichardt’s letter presents a descriptive picture of the musical activity that marked the Vienna of that time in various ways. That this particular musical evening at the Bigots’ was characterised as especially pleasant is a fact that implies an unpretentious ambience. The company is mixed, middle-class and aristocratic, men and women, as large passages of the letter describe. In Reichardt’s characterisation Marie Bigot appears not at all as a well performing amateur, in the formerly positive sense of the word, but as masterful virtuoso, who performed five grand sonatas by Beethoven, whose oeuvre was the at the centre of the evening. It is not specified which individual works these were. The trios that Marie Bigot performed with violinist Schuppanzigh and an unnamed cellist could be the 1808 piano trio op. 70, except for op. 1, since, due to the friendly contact the family maintained with Beethoven, Marie Bigot was well informed about the status of his composing. Thayer reports the following in his biography concerning the occasionally close contact between Beethoven and the Razumovsky household: “Those were the years (1808-15) when, as Seyfried’s says, Beethoven was like a rooster in a henhouse in the princely household. Everything he composed was tested hot as it was out of the frying pan and, by his own admittance, performed exactly as he wanted it, and unfortunately never differently, with an enthusiasm, with love, obedience and a piety that could only emanate from such devoted admirers of his sublime genius; and only by deeply penetrating the most se-
cret intentions, the most complete understanding of spiritual tendencies could those quartet players in performing Beethoven’s compositions reach the universal fame that is uniformly recognised in the entire world of art. (See Thayer, 1908, pp.75-76)

An early concert, this time a public one, is already mentioned in Reichardt’s letters. In his report dated 16 December 1808 he writes: “We also had a morning concert again in the small redoubt hall. A Madame Bigot, whose husband is a good, educated Berliner, librarian to Count Razumovsky, gave a concert and played the piano forte with great virtuosity. Although the choice of pieces performed was not well made for a large audience, as she had chosen one of the most difficult concerts and the very hardest, bizarre variations of Beethoven about a peculiar theme of eight beats. Yet, for the connoisseur she showed a well-developed virtuosity with all the more confidence. Her performance was always, even at the most challenging parts, utterly clear and pure and in particular she demonstrated a rare skill and security with the left hand. The whole concert was almost entirely made up of Beethoven’s music, who appears to be her saint.” (in Gugitz, 1915, pp.187-188)

The variations were most likely the 32 variations on an individual theme in c-minor, WoO 80, which were created in the autumn of 1806 and are closely linked to the last set of the third string quartet op. 59.

The story surrounding Beethoven’s “Appassionata” became truly famous which Paul Bigot, years after his wife’s death, noted down as follows: “While travelling, he [Beethoven] was surprised by a storm and torrential rain that drenched his travelling bag, which held the freshly composed sonata in F minor. Upon arriving in Vienna, he visited us and laughingly showed the still entirely drenched sheets to my wife, who took a closer look. Inspired by this surprising beginning, she went to the piano and started playing the composition. Beethoven hadn’t expected this and was surprised to see how Madam Bigot never slowed for even a moment through the numerous erasures and amends he had made. This was the original that he had been carrying to his publisher to have it set. When Madam Bigot finished playing she asked him to give it to her as a gift, he agreed and faithfully brought it back to her once it had been set.” (Thayer, 1908, p.551)

How authentic is this story that was written down years later? The event was probably recounted in the Bigot household on numerous occasions, serving as a memento of the famous composer in the family’s memory. In fact, the composition’s autograph, which is now located in Paris, does show signs of water damage, as reported by Bigot.

During the country’s French occupation, the couple and their two children left Vienna in 1809 and moved to Paris. The move was more difficult than the move from Neuchâtel to Vienna. Currently available sources don’t reveal how Bigot earned a living during this time. However, his wife seems to have managed to quickly establish a musical salon in their new home. She established contact with Luigi Cherubini and Daniel Auber, both with whom she studied composition and harmonics, as well as with Johann Baptist Cramer, Muzio Clementi and Jan Ladislav Dussek. She formed a trio with violinist Pierre Baillot and cellist Jacques Michel Hurel de Lamare that devoted itself to performing the works of Johann Sebastian Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, thus continuing her musical practice that began in Vienna with violinist Schuppanzigh. She was not solely interested in soloist activity but to equal extend in chamber musical performances. François-Joseph Fétis, who knew the pianist personally and whose biographical essay is one of the most important sources besides Reichardt’s letters, explains the following in his “Biographie universelle des musiciens”: “[...]. Qui n’a pas entendue les belles compositions de Bach, de Haydn, de Mozart et de Beethoven exécutées par Madame Bigot, Lamare et Baillot, ne sait jusqu’où peut aller la perfection de la musique instrumentale. Clementi, Dussek et Cramer apprécèrent le talent de Madame Bigot et la considèrent comme un modèle de perfection.” (“Whoever has not heard the beautiful compositions of Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven performed by Madame Bigot, Lamare and Baillot does not know how far the perfection of instrumental music can lead. Clementi, Dussek and Cramer appreciate Madam Bigot’s talent and regard her as a model of perfection.”; Fétis, 1835-44, Vol. 1, p.413f.)

Marie Bigot’s life took a dramatic turn when her husband was taken prisoner during Napoleon’s Russia campaign in 1812 and remained incarcerated for four years. She was then forced to earn a living for herself and her two children. As the concert profits were apparently insufficient, she started to give lessons. Her reputation as pedagogue grew quickly: together with her sister and her mother she formed the “Bigot school”; in addition, she composed piano etudes, having previously published a number of piano works in Vienna. Her most famous students were Fanny Hensel and Felix Mendelssohn in 1816. Their parents were known for their efforts to secure the best tutors for their children; familiarity with the great German music traditions was a decisive factor as
well. Contact continued beyond the temporary instructions during their stay in Paris, as a letter from Abraham Mendelssohn to his daughter Fanny, dated 16 July 1820, attests: “Your mother recently wrote to me that you had complained about the lack of works to practice the fourth and fifth finger and that Felix instantly wrote one for you. Bigot thinks it is not a lack of practice works but a lack of serious practice, which causes you, like all people, to neglect these fingers. You should dedicate some of your daily practice time, regardless of music, expression or anything else, to very mechanically minding these fingers and firmly pushing down; there were plenty of works in Kramer intended for these fingers and it was important to play these slowly, keeping constant watch and firm pressure applied to these weaklings. By this method and tireless patience she had gained, and was it possible to gain, equal strength in all fingers.” (in Hensel, 1995, p.125)

In the same letter, however, he also reports of her desolate health situation. On 16 September 1820, only 34 years of age, Marie Bigot died of a lung disease, likely tuberculosis. Contact between the families continued even after her death. During a stay in Paris in 1831 Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy recalls her Bach interpretations: “It is now the 24th and yesterday evening at Baillot was pretty. [...] A quintette by Bocherini was the start, a wig but with a very loveable, old gentleman under it; then people demanded a Bach sonata. We chose the A major one. I remembered very old sounds then, those that Baillot used to play with Madam Bigot; […]” (Mendelssohn Bartholdy, 1862, p.305). As late as 1836 Wilhelm Hensel painted a picture of his wife Fanny for Marie Bigot’s mother, Madame Kiéné.

The “Journal des Théâtres, de la littérature, et des arts” recognised the artist with the following obituary: “Madam Bigot, famous pianist, born 1786 in Colmar, recently ended a career that was marked by pleasant virtues, beautified by brilliant successes, but also often crossed by unfortunate events. A cruel and untimely death ripped her from art, her family, and her numerous friends. From the age of just twenty this virtuoso enjoyed a great reputation; musicians appreciated her as one of the most extraordinary interpreters they ever heard. Madam Bigot knew Haydn, Salieri, Beethoven, Dussek and Cramer. Through links with these famous artists she developed the good, clear taste that was so admired in her as well as the charm and the severity that characterised her talent. Clementi honoured her with his advice. Cherubini and his student Auber shared with her the secrets of musical composition. She proved herself worthy of her great teachers. Although her modesty prevented her from publishing her numerous compositions, they bear witness to the fact that – had she chosen to concentrate her musical efforts on this aspect – she would have been able to produce works that would have belonged to the classics of their genres.” (in Johnson, 1992, p.5)

Despite the pathos that occasionally characterises obituaries, what emerges is the picture of an artist who could with her play combine such polar opposites as grace and severity in their nationalist connotations: French grace and German severity. It has not been possible to determine which unpublished compositions are referred to in the obituary. In all likelihood this is an exaggeration, as her piano sonata op. 1 was published in Vienna. The sonata is dedicated to Queen Luise of Prussia, which is probably due to her husband’s diplomatic work at the Prussian court. Her op. 2 is an “Andante varié” with eight variations and a caprice, a composition Marie Bigot dedicated to her sister Caroline Kiéné, was also published in Vienna. Her suite d’études and a rondeau were published in Paris. Fétis mentions another twelve waltzes that were published under her name in his biographical article but he doubts their authenticity.

More on Biography

Appreciation

Having been regarded only as one of Beethoven’s potential lovers by Beethoven literature for the longest time, it has become clear that Marie Bigot deserves a place in history of her own accord. Her main significance lies in the fact that she was an early supporter of the works of the Viennese School in early nineteenth century Paris. Her reputation as a piano pedagogue extended far across France’s borders. “An interesting, truly artistic figure in the first decade of this century was the pianist Madam Bigot, whose husband worked as librarian to Count Razu­movsky. The artistic significance of the lovely young Alsatian lies mainly in her enthusiasm for Beethoven, whose compositions she performed with accomplished technique and immersive understanding.” (Hanslick, 1869, p.213)

Reception

Marie Bigot was known as an excellent pianist and piano pedagogue in her own time. Her most famous students included Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Du-
Bigot, Marie

ring the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Marie Bigot was often only thematised in Beethoven literature as one of Beethoven’s potential lovers, yet she deserves a historic rank as early supporter of his compositions in Vienna as well as in Paris. More recent research has shed more light on her biography as well as on her pianistic and composing physiognomy. In 1992 new editions of her sonata op. 1 and her “Suite d’études” were published.

List of Works

Although obituary mentions numerous works, no additional compositions have been discovered. The Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, which does however contain only a small estate, only holds compositions already known.

Repertoire

Marie Bigot focussed mainly on works by Johann Sebastian Bach as well as the piano and chamber music work of the Viennese School, in particular the piano compositions by Beethoven.

Research

Marie Bigot’s biography is researched at a basic level with regards to her life dates. The Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris holds a few documents. Apart from the first editions of op. 1 and op. 2, the letter by Ludwig van Beethovens to Marie and Paul Bigot dated 1807, probably 4 March, the autograph of “Appassionata” by Ludwig von Beethoven there are two short letter from Marie Bigot to “Monsieur Neukomm” and “Monsieur Maaille” in said library.

Need for Research

Research is required to establish whether it is justified to speak of a Bigot school, since her mother and sister were also active as piano pedagogues. Furthermore, analytical examination of her compositions and source analysis of French journals is outstanding. The estates and biographies of those musicians with which she worked in Paris could also offer further information.

Authority control

Virtual International Authority File (VIAF):
http://viaf.org/viaf/14845060
Deutsche Nationalbibliothek (GND):
http://d-nb.info/gnd/102410801
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