

Female Composers – a music podcast with a pinch of history: Maria Szymanowska (episode 1)

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Ministry of Culture and National Heritage
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MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – 18 Dances of Different Genres: Waltz in E-flat major No. 5 [bars 1–8].*

Hello everyone, and a warm welcome to a new series titled “Female Composers – a music podcast with a pinch of history.” From today, we will meet every Thursday, alternating between Polish and English episodes. This journey will continue until Christmas Eve, when I will share the final recording. I hope this whole series becomes a kind of extended holiday gift that we can begin to unwrap together right now. My name is Aleksandra Bobrowska – I am a pianist with a passion for diverse repertoire, especially the work of female composers. This podcast is created as part of a creative scholarship from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland. I invite you to listen to the first episode, featuring Maria Szymanowska – let’s set off on a journey through time and space!

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – Caprice sur la romance de Joconde [bars 1–8].*

A moment ago you heard the opening bars of a caprice (kapis) based on a theme from a comic opera popular in Maria Szymanowska’s time, titled *Joconde, or The Adventurers* (in the original French: *Joconde, ou Les coureurs d’aventure*). Maria Szymanowska composed the caprice in 1819, and the opera that inspired her had been written a few years earlier by French composer Nicolas Isouard, with a libretto based on a tale by Jean de La Fontaine. In short, the opera tells the story of Joconde and his friend Robert, who set off into the world to win the hearts of the women they meet along the way. It definitely seems to be a perfect plot for a lively comic opera. 😊 The aria (romance) referenced by Szymanowska is sung by Joconde himself and is titled *Dans un délire extrême* (can be loosely translated as: *In Extreme Rapture / Madness*). It expresses a melancholic reflection on the fickleness of the heart and a longing for one’s first love. Szymanowska was exceptionally pleased with her composition and performed it very often during her own concerts.

But let’s return to the early life of the Polish composer and discover her story together.

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – 18 Dances of Different Genres: Cotillion in A-flat major No. 18 (Waltz)*

And so, thanks to the Waltz that forms part of the Cotillion in A-flat major by Maria Szymanowska, we travel back to the memorable year of the French Revolution – 1789. We appear, however, exactly five months after the storming of the Bastille and at a distance of 1,342 kilometers east of the French capital – in Warsaw.

Maria Szymanowska, whose given name was Marianna Agata Wołowska and who was called Marynia at home, was born on the 14th of December 1789 in Warsaw to a wealthy family of townspeople and brewers. The family had Frankist roots; Maria's great-grandfather, Eliza Szor, joined Jacob Frank at the age of 67. Frank was a Jewish mystic considered a heretic for rejecting the Talmud and, in 1759, leading his followers to a mass baptism while building a cult-like movement around himself. Maria's mother was Barbara Lanckorońska, from a noble family, and her father was the brewer Franciszek Wołowski (the name Franciszek was common in the family, a nod to the earlier-mentioned Frank). The Wołowski family was large; young Marynia was the fourth of ten children, with five brothers and four sisters (including her younger sister Kazimiera, who was also known as a skilled pianist). Maria's siblings quickly rose through administrative and military ranks, creating a stable and inspiring environment for her and accompanying her on her concert tours abroad, which will be mentioned later in the podcast.

Maria did not study at official conservatories, as they did not accept women during her childhood. Her talent grew from an early age in the quiet of her home, where learning to play an instrument was a common and constant part of raising girls from wealthy families. She began taking professional piano lessons as a child, first studying with Antoni Lisowski and Tomasz Gremm. Apparently, even before starting lessons with teachers, she enjoyed spending time at the household spinet, improvising and creating her own melodies. As she later said — quoted by one of her biographers, Igor Belza — “*she never had a good music teacher she could speak of*” (quoted in: Igor Belza, *Maria Szymanowska*, trans. Iwona Ilnicka, PWM, Kraków 1987, p. 16). Most of the paths leading to her later musical career, her musical voice, and her personal playing technique had to be found on her own.

In Maria Szymanowska's family home in Warsaw on Waliców Street (which, unfortunately, no longer exists after being destroyed during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), prominent figures from the world of music and culture — both Polish and international — were frequent guests. Her early environment was therefore vibrant, stimulating, and inspiring. The Wołowski family welcomed renowned Polish composers such as Karol Kurpiński, Franciszek Lessel, and Józef Elsner, the teacher of Fryderyk Chopin. International artists also visited, among them for example, the famous Italian singer Angelica Catalani, known for her remarkable vocal range and coloratura virtuosity; she would later play a very important role in the beginning of Szymanowska's career and we shall speak of this soon, but now - let's hear some music!

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – 18 Dances of Different Genres: Mazurka in C major No. 17 [bars 1-8].*

It is also worth pausing for a moment to trace the fate of Szymanowska's hometown at this point in history, in order to fully understand the perspective of her childhood and adolescence. So let us set off on this journey! As mentioned, she was born in Warsaw in 1789 – the year of the French Revolution – when the city pulsed with revolutionary energy and the hopes stirred by the turbulent period of the Four-Year Sejm (which met from 1788 to 1792). This uplifting atmosphere of reform soon gave way to dramatic historical upheavals that marked the entire childhood and early youth of the future composer. Growing up in the capital, Maria witnessed the tragic fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: at the age of three she lived through the Second Partition of Poland in 1793, and less than a year later – the bloody battles of the Kościuszko Uprising in 1794, including the dramatic defense of Warsaw and the massacre of Praga (one of Warsaw's districts). The insurrection led to the closure of the National Theatre and a sharp decline in concerts, shifting artistic life into private salons. The final loss of independence came with the Third Partition in 1795, when Maria was not yet six

years old – Warsaw was reduced to a provincial Prussian town for the next several years. Paradoxically, Prussian rule brought the Wołowski family unexpected prosperity (you may recall that they were a family of brewers): a high tax on wine increased beer sales, allowing them to educate their children and maintain an active social life. In 1799, Wojciech Bogusławski (the exiled director of the National Theater in Warsaw) returned to Warsaw from Lviv, bringing Józef Elsner with him and reviving the National Theatre, which rejuvenated the city's cultural life. Despite the deep political crisis, Warsaw did not lose its cultural spirit, becoming in 1807, by Napoleon Bonaparte's decree, the capital of the newly created Duchy of Warsaw (formally ruled by the King of Saxony, Frederick Augustus). By the way, during the ceremony of blessing the banners of the newly formed Polish army in 1807, Maria's eldest brother, Jan Ignacy, was present. In April 1809, during the war with Austria he was promoted to corporal for his military merits. Later, in 1812, he fought at Berezina, where he was wounded and taken prisoner by the Russians – for his bravery he was awarded the Virtuti Militari cross, the award of highest honour for a soldier. In this reborn city, full of contrasts and patriotic revival, Maria shaped her artistic sensitivity, absorbing the atmosphere of the salons. These private spaces took over the role of public concert halls – the National Theatre had been closed by the Prussian authorities in 1794 and reopened only in 1799, and the concert hall in the Radziwiłł Palace, where the famous Thursday concerts had once taken place, ceased to operate regularly after 1795. In aristocratic and bourgeois salons, despite the ravages of war, Polish culture and music were continually nurtured.

This brings us to the year 1810, when near Warsaw, in Żelazowa Wola, Fryderyk Chopin was born. On June 21st of the same year, Maria married Józef Teofil Franciszek Szymanowski – her cousin (Maria's father was the brother of Józef's mother, Agata), a follower of the Frankist movement, a tobacco and snuff merchant, an educated and wealthy man who, as it would soon turn out, had a very different vision of their future life together than Maria did. We will get to all of that in a moment – for now, let's listen to Szymanowska's March in D major, where she draws on the famous aria *Non più andrai* from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – Six Marches: D major No. 3*

From the marriage of Maria and Józef Szymanowski, four children were born: in 1811 the twins Helena and Romuald, in 1812 Celina (who later became the wife of Adam Mickiewicz, a very important poet and writer), and in 1813 Aleksy Karol, who sadly died at the age of two.

The marriage soon fell into a deep crisis. Józef Szymanowski expected a traditional role from his wife – a capable homemaker managing the household. Maria, however, wished to develop her musical craft, perform and explore the world. Around 1815, after the death of their youngest son, their relationship faced serious difficulties heightened by their clashing personalities. Facing an important life decision and increasingly aware that she needed to prepare for independence, Maria intensified her piano studies. In June 1819, Franz Xaver Mozart (the son of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart) arrived in Warsaw to perform at the National Theatre. He had likely already visited the Wołowski family salon. His meeting with Maria in 1819 played a decisive role in her further musical education. Although Mozart recognized her great talent, he also offered some critical remarks. Upon hearing them, the Polish artist decided to master her craft and soon traveled to Dresden to take a few masterclasses with him. Later that year, Angelica Catalani also arrived in Warsaw, likewise visiting the Wołowski salon. These encounters with renowned European artists reinforced Maria's conviction that she could turn music into a profession and achieve financial independence from her husband. It seems to me

that Catalani's performances, in particular, had a profound impact on the young Polish pianist, providing a powerful impetus for her to pursue a professional career. The Italian singer—a woman who managed to support herself through her performances and attain independence—became an artistic role model for Szymanowska.

References to Szymanowska earning a living as a teacher appear as early as 1819. That autumn, she published 70 piano miniatures with the Leipzig-based firm Breitkopf & Härtel — the world's oldest music publishing house with an unbroken history (now over 300 years old). Since 1798, the company had also published the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, for which Józef Elsner wrote reports from Warsaw. It was Elsner who recommended Szymanowska to the publisher; she also received the backing of John Field, the famous Irish pianist and composer, to whom she later dedicated her *Caprice sur la romance de Joconde* — a work whose opening passage introduced today's podcast.

After separating from her husband in 1820, Maria raised her daughters on her own (her son, Romuald, remained with his father). The French violinist Pierre Rode wrote to her at the time: "You have reached a level of perfection that should prompt you to leave Warsaw and come to Paris." It did not take much to persuade Maria.

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – 18 Dances of Different Genres: Waltz in E-flat major No. 5* [bars 1–8].

Szymanowska became one of the first European women to make music a paid profession on such a large scale. She was the first professional female pianist to tour extensively across Europe at a time when it was considered appropriate for women to play only as amateurs in domestic drawing rooms. Revolutionarily, she acted as her own manager: she personally negotiated fees, organized travel logistics, rented venues, and handled the accounting for her tours. She traveled with the assistance of her siblings - her sister Kazimiera and her brothers, first Karol and later Stanisław.

Between 1823 and 1827, Maria Szymanowska undertook a monumental European concert tour. This was a period of intense activity for the Polish pianist and composer. I will mention, to avoid losing my way amidst the many facets of these years, that I am relying on the timeline included in the excellent study by Danuta Gwizdalanka — part of the *Small Monographs* series. I highly recommend this book — and the entire *Small Monographs* series — to everyone; it is a truly wonderful initiative by the Polish Music Publishing house (PWM); I'm only afraid that, for now, it has been published in Polish exclusively, but hope soon that the translations to various languages will appear on the market.

Let us return, however, to Maria and her tour. She began her concert career by heading east, visiting St. Petersburg and Moscow, and subsequently performing in Tulchyn, Zhytomyr, Dubno, Kremenets, Vinnytsia, and Lviv; she also appeared in Kyiv, where she performed one evening alongside the distinguished Polish violinist and composer Karol Lipiński. In May, she performed in Warsaw once more - this was an official farewell concert at the National Theatre prior to her next journey, this time to the West.

In 1823, Maria continued her travels, performing in cities such as Poznań and Karlsbad. During her stay in Marienbad (Mariánské Lázně) in August 1823, she captivated Johann Wolfgang von Goethe; he was at the spa recovering from a deeply painful romantic disappointment, and listening to her play brought him the genuine, longed-for solace he sought. To express his admiration and gratitude, he dedicated his famous poem *Reconciliation* (*Aussöhnung*) to Szymanowska:

Reconciliation

by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832)
translated from German by Josh Olson

Desire begets affliction!—who can banish
Despair from hearts bereaved of highest gain?
Where are the hours that all too swiftly vanish?
You chose the loveliest, and chose in vain.
Beginnings darken now; the mind grows clouded;
To every sense the noble world lies shrouded.

Then music floats to us on angels' wings—
Its myriad voices weave and coalesce
To touch the fount from which our essence springs,
To dazzle with eternal loveliness:
Eyes glisten, and we sense the holy worth
Of music and the tears that it draws forth.

And thus the brightened heart soon recognizes
That it still lives and beats, and joys in beating,
And, grateful for so rich a gift, it rises
To offer up itself in kind, entreating
That from now on it might forever prove
The double bliss of music and of love.

Later in that same year, 1823, Maria performed in Dresden, Leipzig, Weimar and Berlin. In the spring of 1824, she traveled to Paris, departing for London on April 20th; there, alongside her concert performances, she also engaged in teaching. She spent the entire concert season in England, earning acclaim from figures such as the Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini, who was also in the country. It was from London that she set out on the next leg of her journey, to Italy via Geneva, armed with letters of recommendation from Rossini that opened doors to the local musical and aristocratic elites.

As a significant aside, letters of recommendation from renowned artists or members of the aristocracy opened many doors for Maria and facilitated her success in managing her own career. Over the years, she received such letters from many other important artists as well as representatives of the nobility.

Let us return, however, to Maria Szymanowska's monumental concert tour. In 1824, she continued her journey through Italy — a rather innovative move for her, as the country was not a common concert destination for virtuoso pianists at the time — performing in Milan, Florence, Rome, Naples, and Venice. In March 1825, she revisited London, where she once again gave concerts and taught piano. She spent the autumn in Paris and, towards the end of the year, performed in The Hague and Amsterdam. In 1826, she returned to London via Brussels; this time, she focused primarily on teaching piano, performing only sporadically. She returned to Warsaw in the summer of 1826 and performed in her hometown in early 1827, giving concerts at the National Theatre on January 15th

and February 7th.

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska - 18 Dances of Different Genres: Polonaise in F minor No. 4*

Maria returned briefly to Warsaw, hoping to settle in her hometown. However, she found the capital vastly changed from the days of her youth. Following the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Warsaw had become the capital of the Kingdom of Poland (Congress Poland), under the control of the Russian Tsar. The political atmosphere was oppressive, with tensions mounting that would eventually lead to the November Uprising of 1830. Although cultural life persisted, it offered Maria no opportunities for career advancement commensurate with her ambitions and international renown. A lack of suitable concert halls and limited earning potential prompted her to leave. Warsaw — which during her childhood had bustled with salon life and served as a hub of Polish culture — could no longer provide the conditions necessary for her full artistic development given her professional circumstances at the time. She decided to move to St. Petersburg with her daughters, Helena and Celina; this was particularly appealing given that, during a visit to St. Petersburg in 1822, she had been awarded the official title of First Pianist to Their Imperial Majesties — a distinction that promised her significant status and prestige. After settling permanently in St. Petersburg in 1828, she devoted herself to teaching. She gave music lessons to the daughters of the highest aristocracy and members of the imperial family (Grand Dukes), enjoying a reputation as an outstanding educator. In St. Petersburg, Maria also hosted a renowned artistic salon at 15 Italienskaya Street, frequented — much like the Wołowski family home — by the most distinguished figures of the local and international artistic worlds. One of the guests was also Adam Mickiewicz — the magnificent poet whom Maria and her daughters had previously met on their way to St. Petersburg. As later years would reveal, he was destined to become the husband of one of Maria's daughters, Celina.

Maria Szymanowska died suddenly on July 25th 1831, in St. Petersburg during a cholera epidemic that was ravaging the city. She was only 42 years old. Her death was a tremendous loss to the European musical world. She was buried in the Lutheran cemetery in St. Petersburg, which no longer exists today.

Maria Szymanowska left behind not only a rich body of work - comprising over 100 piano pieces, songs, and chamber works - but, above all, a groundbreaking example of a woman who dared to live on her own terms, turning music into a profession and a source of independence in an era when such choices seemed all but impossible for women.

MUSIC: *Maria Szymanowska – Caprice sur la romance de Joconde* [bars 1–8].

There is so much more to say about Maria Szymanowska: her charismatic personality as evidenced by contemporary accounts of her; her prolific work as a composer - often viewed solely through a pedagogical lens, though unjustly so, as she created many fascinating concert-worthy pieces; or even the *Stammbuch* she kept - a type of historical autograph album filled with entries from a wide array of figures. All of this offers enough material for many more podcast episodes.

I am also very curious to know what interested or surprised you the most, dear listeners. This podcast will be published on my YouTube and Spotify channels, and shared on my website and Facebook page: *Aleksandra Bobrowska – concert pianist*. Please feel free to share your thoughts in the comments and subscribe to the series to discover the stories of other women in the world of classical music. I also encourage you to listen to recordings of her compositions — both piano works and

songs — available online; I'm eager to hear which ones become your favorites! If you would like to read or watch something about Maria (including content for children), I have compiled (KOMPAJLD) a list of publications about the composer. Be sure to visit my website, aleksandrabobrowska.eu, to find the transcript of this podcast along with a list of recommended books, articles, and recordings.

I am signing off today with the sounds of a well-known nocturne by Maria Szymanowska, composed in 1825 in A-flat major and titled *Le Murmure* (French for the *murmur* or *whisper*) — a piece the composer also performed during her grand concert tour. There is also a fascinating version of the piece for three hands, created so that Maria could perform it alongside her students. Today, you will hear the version for two hands, but I encourage you to seek out the alternative version as well — it is excellent!

I'm looking forward to discovering with you another interesting female composer figure in the next episode - for now, let her name be a mystery. Enjoy the nocturne and until next time!

MUZYKA: *Maria Szymanowska - Nocturne in A flat major "Le Murmure"*

Books and Monographs

Danuta Gwizdalanka, *Szymanowska* (Small Monographs series), Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne (PWM), Kraków 2023.

Marta Bacewicz, Katarzyna Walentynowicz, *Marysia Szymanowska*, Fryderyk Chopin Institute, Warsaw 2022 (biography for children and young adults).

Igor Bełza, *Maria Szymanowska*, PWM, Kraków 1987 (translated from the 1956 Russian edition).

Teofil Syga, Stanisław Szenic, *Maria Szymanowska i jej czasy* [Maria Szymanowska and Her Times], Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warsaw 1960.

Maria Iwanejko, *Maria Szymanowska*, PWM, Kraków 1959.

Józef and Maria Mirski, *Maria Szymanowska. Album 1789–1831*.

Academic articles and selected publications

Irena Poniatowska, *Maria Szymanowska and the style brilliant* (academic article, 2022).

Élisabeth Zapolska Chapelle, *Maria Szymanowska – A Woman of Europe* (published, among others, in the periodical *Piano* No. 25, 2011/2012).

Sławomir Dobrzański, *Maria Szymanowska and Fryderyk Chopin: Parallelism and Influence* (article dedicated to the composer's relationship with Chopin).

E. Talma-Davous, *The Autograph of Maria Szymanowska's "Polonoise"* (*Ruch Muzyczny* No. 7, 2006).

Maja Trochimczyk (Maria Anna Harley), Sławomir Dobrzański, *Maria Szymanowska: Pianist and Composer* (book/monograph in English, 2006).

Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, *Bertel and Szymanian* (*Przegląd Kulturalny* No. 37, 1962).

Pierre-Olivier Ozanne, *Maria Szymanowska, pianiste et compositrice. Un modèle pour le jeune Chopin?* (article in French).

Documentaries, educational films, and conversations

[Maria Szymanowska – A Musical Calling Card](#): A short biographical film produced for the International Competition of Polish Music.

[Portrait of a Pioneering Virtuoso](#): A feature highlighting her role as a muse to Mickiewicz and Goethe and as a pioneer of piano writing.

[Audio drama "Marysia Fulfills Her Dream"](#): A story for younger audiences produced by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute.

[Presentation of the book "Marysia Szymanowska"](#): A video promoting an educational publication about the composer's childhood.

[Maria Szymanowska | DNA of Polish Music #23](#): A conversation between Mariusz Gradowski and musicologist Danuta Gwizdalanka about the composer's private life, career, and independence.

Performances of specific works

[20 Études and Preludes](#): A complete collection of piano exercises from 1819–1820, performed by Sławomir Dobrzański.

[Polonaise in F minor](#): Official video recording as part of the "Music From Chopin's Land" project.

[Nocturne in A-flat major "Le Murmure"](#): Official recording released by the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music.

[Nocturne in B-flat major](#): A recording of one of the artist's most mature piano works.

[Song from the Tower](#): Performance of a song composed to lyrics by Adam Mickiewicz.

[Selected Works for Piano](#): A compilation recording showcasing a cross-section of miniatures and *style brillant* compositions.

Thematic Playlists and Series

[Maria Szymanowska – Complete Piano Works](#): A complete album playlist featuring 90 recordings of all her piano works, performed by S. P. Dobrzański.

[Maria Szymanowska Mazurkas](#): A series of 24 videos featuring performances of mazurkas—some of the earliest stylized versions of this dance in history.

[Collection of Romantic Works](#): A playlist gathering interpretations of polonaises and other piano miniatures.