

# Female Composers - A Music Podcast with a Pinch of History: Mel Bonis (Episode 2)

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Ministerstwo Kultury  
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## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - The Song of the Spinning Wheel, Op. 24 [fragment].**

Welcome to another episode of the series titled "Female Composers - a music podcast with a pinch of history." Aleksandra Bobrowska is at the microphone today, encouraging you to once again become fascinated by the history of music and embark on a short journey through time and space with me, all thanks to another, utterly unique figure. This episode will be about a person who studied composition at the Paris Conservatoire. Her work – both orchestral and piano – was characterized by a love of rich harmony as well as subtle and impressionistic sounds. To make the answer easier, I'll add that this person composed a piece titled "La Cathédrale blessée," sometimes incorrectly translated as "The Sunken Cathedral," though it should more accurately be called "The Wounded Cathedral." Can you guess who I'm talking about? If you thought we were talking about the French impressionist Claude Debussy, then... you were almost right, because today we'll be talking about his college friend – the wonderful, brave, and incredibly talented, though sometimes lost in her personal life - Mel Bonis. Before we go on, I'll just add that I'm producing this podcast as part of a creative scholarship from the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of Poland. I invite you to listen to today's episode!

## **MUZYKA: Mel Bonis - Five musical pieces: Minuet op.14 [fragment].**

Mel Bonis, whose actual full name was Mélanie Hélène Bonis, was born in Paris on January 21<sup>st</sup>, 1858, into a petit-bourgeois family living in the heart of the French capital. Her father, Pierre Bonis, was a manager at a watch factory, and her mother, Marie-Anne-Clémence Mangin, was a passementière, or haberdashery worker. The young composer's daily life was far from artistic freedom - her home was rather strict, based on discipline, duty, and social conventions.

Mélanie demonstrated an extraordinary sensitivity to sound from a young age. There was a piano at her home, which was treated more like a piece of furniture – a traditional and conventional piece of equipment for any decent living room. This unique piece of furniture fascinated little Mel to such an extent that she reportedly spent hours on it, inventing melodies and playing with the sounds. Her parents did not take her fascination seriously, because for a woman in that historical period, music was still considered a rather decorative

element than a lifelong vocation. Fortunately, when she was 12, Monsieur Maury – a family friend and cornet professor at the prestigious Paris Conservatoire – recognized her potential and convinced her parents to allow her to pursue formal musical education. A few years later, he also introduced the 16-year-old Mélanie to the renowned composer César Franck, which opened the door for her to work with one of the most distinguished artists of her time. Franck taught her piano and followed Mélanie's early compositions with interest. Over time, she officially became a student at the Paris Conservatoire, studying composition with Ernest Guiraud. It was in this environment that Bonis also met the young Claude Debussy and Gabriel Pierné, composers who would soon become important figures in French music at the turn of the century.

Her musical fascinations thus developed at the intersection of several aesthetics. On the one hand, she was raised in the tradition of late Romanticism, particularly that associated with Franck, with his rich harmony and romantic taste. On the other, she matured in Paris at a time when a new, more subtle, colorful, and impressionistic sonic language was emerging. This is why the works of Mel Bonis so frequently combine lyricism, delicacy, refined harmony, and a meticulous attention to tone. Her music is not a simple copy of any of these trends. Rather, it is a testament to a deeply personal voice that managed to combine tradition with modernity.

At the Conservatoire, something also happened that had a profound impact on her personal life. Mélanie met Amédée Landély Hettich - singer, poet, journalist, and later music critic. Hettich was a man deeply connected to the art world. Over time, he became much more than just a school acquaintance: he was her great love, inspiration, and spiritual partner. It was to him that she dedicated some of her songs, and he encouraged her creativity and supported her musical ambitions.

Mélanie's family, however, did not approve of this relationship. Her parents viewed the artistic world with distrust, considering it unstable, dangerous, and inappropriate for their daughter. Furthermore, they did not want the young woman to link her future with a man from a musical background. Family opposition was so strong that Mélanie was forced to leave the Conservatoire, despite being an exceptionally promising student – she won, among other things, first prize in her year in musical harmony and second prize in accompaniment. This experience ended the first, crucial phase of her life and interrupted her development as a composer for a long time.

### **MUZYKA: Mel Bonis - Five musical pieces: Eclogue op.12 [fragment].**

In 1883, Mélanie was forced by her family to marry Albert Domange. He was a wealthy man, much older than her, twice widowed, and already had five sons from previous relationships. Domange had no interest in his wife's music and failed to understand her creative needs. For Mélanie, this meant entering a world of bourgeois duty, managing the daily household and caring for the children. They had three children: Pierre, Jeanne, and Édouard. The young composer's artistic activity was, in a sense, frozen for almost ten years.

The composer's return to creativity was largely due to her reconnection with her youthful love, Amédée Hettich. Years later, they met again, and their old love was rekindled. Hettich encouraged her to compose, supported her work, and helped her return to the Parisian musical scene. He also introduced Mel to the future publisher of her compositions, the renowned Alphonse Leduc. Her relationship with Hettich also had a dramatic dimension. Mel Bonis was a practicing Catholic, and their friendship increasingly blossomed into a romance, which caused her considerable internal conflict. The couple soon had a child together. Their daughter, Madeleine, born secretly during a trip to Switzerland in 1899, remained hidden for a long time due to the social norms of the time, which was a source of great pain for Mel Bonis. Madeleine was raised by a trusted person, and both Mel Bonis and Amédée Hettich became her godparents.

Time passed. Mel increasingly showed signs of depression, but she tried her best to fulfill the responsibilities of her social roles, often pushing her pain into the background, striving to meet all the expectations of those around her. Dark clouds were also gathering over Europe, with the outbreak of World War I, in which her youngest son, Édouard, served.

### **MUZYKA: Mel Bonis - Five musical pieces: Gai Printemps op.11 [fragment].**

After the death of Mel's husband, Albert, in 1918, the situation became even more complicated. Bonis decided to take Madeleine, her previously unacknowledged daughter, into her home. However, she didn't tell anyone the truth, citing the death of her previous guardian and a desire to help. She was also already a widow, so she didn't have to consider her husband's opinion at that point. However, the situation became more complicated when Madeleine and her youngest son, Édouard, who had just returned from the army, became close, unaware of their relationship. Bonis was forced to confess the truth to her daughter to prevent their relationship - this was one of the most painful moments of her life. Eventually, Madeleine moved in with her mother and later married another man, but apparently – according to Mel Bonis's great-granddaughter, Christine Géliot, who wrote a book about her famous ancestor – Madeleine never fully recovered psychologically from discovering the truth about her origins, and lived with a sense of burden and sadness for the rest of her life.

In the final period of her life, Mel Bonis gradually withdrew from public life, spending her time away from the bustle of Parisian life, often surrounded by her grandchildren. She died on March 18th, 1937, leaving behind over three hundred works - from piano miniatures and chamber music, through organ compositions, to hymns and religious pieces. Her music is distinguished by its subtle expression, clear structure, and refined tonal color, revealing a deeply personal artistic language, shaped at the intersection of the Romantic tradition and the sensibilities of the turn of the 20th century. Today, Bonis is considered one of the important, though long-underappreciated, figures in French music of that period. Her family biography - marked by domestic responsibilities, difficult relationships, and painful choices - in turn allows for a better understanding of the conditions in which she composed and the scale of the constraints she faced as a female composer.

### **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Five musical pieces: Butterflies op.28.**

A moment ago, the beautiful Papillons, Op. 28, was performed, and—and I truly cannot shake this impression every time I perform this piece - their mixture of melancholy and the interplay of shades between the major and minor sections are a kind of image of our composer's inner self. She herself seems like the titular butterflies: full of inner life, energy, and a gentle, creative beauty that permeates every aspect of her work, yet at the same time immensely constrained by the conventions and demands of her surroundings. I experience this piece somewhat as if the color nuances of her creative wings were muted in the outer, minor sections of the work. Reassuringly, however, the middle section is wonderfully dreamy, and the piece ends with a musical gesture reminiscent of an upward flight—as if the titular butterfly were trying to shake from its wings the ash that has buried its true face and fly away toward the light, where it belongs, where it can shimmer with the fullness of its true colors. Of course, such pictorial interpretations of musical content are the creative speculations of those whose imaginations tend to imagine concrete images. However, it's impossible to deny Mel Bonis's music its wonderful illustrativeness and vividness. Taking the opportunity of our online meeting, I'd like to sit down for a moment today and examine a group of works that don't formally constitute a musical cycle or collection, but have been published under the common title "Femmes de légende," or in Polish, "Women of Legend." These are piano compositions that reference famous female figures from literature, legends, mythology, and even the Bible. I must admit that Mel Bonis's choice of characters really puzzled me, but I'll discuss the reasons for this surprise in a moment, using specific female protagonists as examples.

Before we embark on this journey, let me just say that I usually record the sample musical excerpts for the podcast at home. However, the themes from "Femmes de légende," which will appear between the comments in a moment, are from my recital of Mel Bonis' music last year, performed at the Swiss music festival Jardins Musicaux.

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Mélisande op.109**

### **MELISANDA // Mélisande (1898) op.109 [fragment]**

The most famous Mélisande comes from the play *Pelléas et Mélisande* by Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck, written in 1892 - and it is this character to whom Mel Bonis most likely alludes in her work. In this Symbolist play, Mélisande remains a deeply mysterious, almost elusive figure. Her story begins in the forest: discovered by Prince Golaud, she finds her way to his kingdom and becomes his wife, though she is unable or unwilling to explain who she is or where she comes from. Soon, however, in the castle world, a love develops between her and Golaud's younger brother, Pelléas. This love, developing slowly and in an aura of understatement, becomes the seed of tragedy: her jealous husband brings about Pelléas's death, and Mélisande - delicate, passive in the face of her fate, yet full of childlike innocence - ultimately falls victim to the devastating emotions that surround her and dies quietly after giving birth to her child. As a typical Symbolist heroine, Mélisande embodies mystery and vulnerability. She is more of a symbol than a psychological figure: an elusive presence around which drama grows. It's hard to resist the temptation to associate her with Mel Bonis herself, who, at the time of the composition's year 1898, was having an affair with her school friend, Hettich.

The character of Mélisande also gained prominence in music, primarily thanks to Claude Debussy, who composed the opera "Pelléas et Mélisande" in 1902. In this opera, Mélisande is also a figure of mystery and charm, and Debussy's music perfectly captures the subtlety and elusiveness of her character. Mélisande, though fictional, remains a lasting source of inspiration for artists in various fields, from literature to music, leaving an important mark on European culture.

Mel Bonis's "Mélisande" was composed before Debussy's opera. The piece is said to be a musical interpretation of the passage in which Pelléas describes the beauty of Mélisande's hair, held in his hands and compared to something luminous, like a golden bird. The composition gained acclaim during the composer's lifetime, and Mel Bonis herself added the note "my favorite" to the margin of the manuscript.

### **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Women of legend: Desdemon op.101**

#### **DESDEMONA // Desdémona op.101 (1913) [fragment]**

Desdemona is a fictional character; she has become a symbol of fidelity, love, and tragedy in literature. Some scholars suggest she may have been inspired by real women from the Renaissance, but there is no conclusive evidence for her existence. Desdemona is one of the main characters in William Shakespeare's tragedy "Othello." She is the daughter of the senator Brabantia, who marries Othello, an experienced military commander. Her character is portrayed as full of innocence, loyalty, and devotion. In Shakespeare's play, her story is marked by betrayal and intrigue, primarily at the hands Othello's soldier, who manipulates him into believing that Desdemona is betraying him. He does this out of revenge for his failure to be promoted in the army. Despite her innocence, Desdemona falls victim to Othello's jealousy. Othello, convinced of the plot, kills Desdemona, driven by jealousy and anger, only to later discover her innocence. This story serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive power of jealousy and manipulation.

Under the title of the work, Bonis included an epigraph reading:

***"The poor soul sat down at the foot of a sycamore tree. Sing of the sweet willow and the willow again."***

*This line comes from a song sung by Desdemona in Act IV, Scene III of Shakespeare's "Othello." Desdemona, a tragic heroine, sings this song as a premonition of her sad fate. The song of the willow tells the story of a woman abandoned by her lover, which directly alludes to Desdemona's situation, as she feels increasingly lonely and desperate due to Othello's jealousy. In the context of the play, it foreshadows the tragic ending of Desdemona's fate, and its words emphasize themes of love, betrayal, and inevitable fate. By singing this song, Desdemona expresses her helplessness and sadness, which heightens the emotional tension of the play and foreshadows the coming tragedy.*

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Ophelia op.165**

### **OFELIA // Ophelia op.165 (1909) [fragment]**

Ophelia is one of the most fascinating female characters in English literature. Shakespeare brought her to life in Hamlet — a play that has continued to move and inspire for centuries. Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius, sister of Laertes, and Hamlet's beloved, but her story quickly becomes much more than a tale of unhappy love. She is drawn into a world of courtly intrigue, manipulation, and conflicting loyalties, until she finally breaks under the weight of events. After her father's death and the breakdown of her relationship with Hamlet, she loses touch with reality and drowns in a river — a scene echoing in the history of literature and art. Ophelia has become a symbol of innocence, fragility, and a woman's fate dependent on a world constructed by men. It's no wonder she has been revisited throughout the centuries in painting, music, and literature — particularly in 19th-century art, where her character acquired an incredibly powerful, emotional, and symbolic dimension. It is also hard to resist the impression that Ophelia's internal conflict, leading to breakdown and almost madness, could have been a state with which Mel Bonis herself identified, as the tragic fate of women deprived of influence over their own lives was also partly her own.

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Viviane op.80**

### **WIWIANA // Viviane op.80 (1909) [fragment]**

Viviane, also known as the Lady of the Lake, is one of the most enigmatic figures in Arthurian legend. She appears in stories as a woman with extraordinary power — someone who stands on the border between the worlds of man, nature, and magic. One of the most important moments of the entire myth is attributed to her: the gift of Excalibur to King Arthur, symbolically confirming his royal destiny. In some versions of the legend, Viviane also appears as Merlin's teacher and mentor, and their relationship is portrayed in many ways — as a bond of trust, but also one of tension, ambivalence, and betrayal. In art, she is most often depicted as an elusive figure, surrounded by water, mist, and an aura of the extraordinary. Over time, her image has changed, but one thing has remained constant: Viviane has always been a symbol of mystery and magic. This is one of the brightest musical moments of Femmes de légende - you can feel the lightness, vitality and creative power in it.

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Phœbé op.30**

### **FEBE // Phobé op.30 (1909)**

Phœbé, also known as Phoebe, is one of the Titans and a figure dating back to the oldest layers of Greek mythology. Daughter of Uranus and Gaia, she holds a special place in this world — she combines the primal power of nature, wisdom, and the gentle light of the moon. Phœbé may not be the most spectacular figure in myth, but that is precisely where her power lies — she symbolizes guidance and the quiet, profound presence that accompanies the birth of the world.

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Salomé op.100**

### **SALOME // Salome op.100 (1909)**

Salome is a figure who appears in both historical records and in literature and art, often shrouded in mystery and controversy. In reality, she was the daughter of Herodias, and her story is most often associated with the biblical account of the beheading of John the Baptist. According to the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Salome danced before Herod Antipas, so enchanting him that he promised to fulfill her every wish. At the urging of her mother, Herodias, Salome demanded John the Baptist's head on a platter; her mother was motivated by a desire for revenge and to silence the prophet, as John the Baptist had condemned her affair. In literature and art, Salome often functions as a symbol of dangerous charm and seductive femininity. Her character has been immortalized in numerous works, including Oscar Wilde's drama "Salome" and Richard Strauss's opera of the same name. In painting, she appears in numerous paintings, usually depicted during her famous dance or holding the head of John the Baptist. These interpretations emphasize both her beauty and her destructive power, making her a figure of incredibly complex symbolism. I must admit, with this figure, I understood how devastating it was for Mel Bonis to submit to her family's decision and shape her life according to the will of her surroundings—since she was the only character from her beloved Bible (Mel was a very religious Christian) to choose this particular feminine symbol—a powerless woman who, not knowing what she truly wanted, submits to her mother's cruel judgments. I believe that Mel Bonis carried immense regret and a sense of senselessness for most of her life, a decision made at the urging and under pressure from her loved ones, venting her emotions through art and the contexts cited.

## **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Legendary Women: Omphale op.86**

### **OMPHALE // Omphale op.86 (1910)**

Omphale was the legendary queen of Lydia, known in Greek mythology as a confident and influential figure. She was primarily famous for her connection with Heracles, whom she bought as a slave after he was sentenced to service for killing Iphitos. Although Heracles was known for his incredible strength and valor, Omphale was able to subdue him and force him to perform tasks traditionally assigned to women, such as spinning and weaving. In this way, the myth of Omphale and Heracles challenged stereotypical gender roles, demonstrating role reversals and the power of female authority. During her reign, Omphale was also considered a just and wise ruler, further enriching her legend in mythology. I believe that Mel Bonis also identified with the strength of the heroine she portrayed. The situation of female composers during her lifetime, especially in her early youth, was characterized by social barriers, limited access to education, and the need to conceal their identities. Mel Bonis herself signed her name this way, using the abbreviation Mel instead of her full name, Mélanie, to conceal the fact that she was a woman. She was also one of the first composers officially admitted to study at the Paris Conservatoire, a pioneer and harbinger of the coming changes—in short, a kind of musical Omphale.

We've reached the end of our story. Thank you for joining me today, which I hope was as fascinating for you as it was for me, because I'm always thrilled to discover new gems of classical music that have been somewhat buried by the dust of oblivion over time. Finally, I'll dust off two more compositions. In a moment, you'll hear my home recording of the aforementioned Desdemona, followed immediately by the magnificent concert waltz, Les Gitanos; a piano piece written in 1909, inspired by Gypsy music and culture. This composition is in keeping with the exoticism prevalent in French music at the turn of the 20th century. The piece is characterized by a lively rhythm, syncopations, the use of modal scales, and imitation of guitar effects on the piano. The form of the piece is similar to a rhapsody – free-flowing, with clear dynamic and tempo contrasts, conveying a sense of improvisation and dance-like rapture. Bonis skillfully blends elements of folklore with her own unique harmonic language. So, I say – see you in the next episode, and let the music sing!

### **MUSIC: Mel Bonis - Women of legend: Desdemon op.101 + Les Gitanos, Op.15**

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### **Online videos and documents (YouTube):**

- [France Musique, 2019. Mel Bonis: les souffrances d'une jeune compositrice - Aliette de Laleu.](#) [online video] Available on YouTube on the Plurielles 34 / Mel Bonis playlist channel [Biographical reportage focusing on the difficulties the artist faced in a male-dominated music world];
- [La Boite à Pépites, 2020. Mel Bonis - Compositrices dessinées #2.](#) [online video] Available on YouTube on the Mel Bonis (1858 - 1937) playlist channel [An animated short documentary presenting the composer's biography];
- At Home With Music, 2022. Women Composers - Episode 3 - Mel Bonis. [online video] Available on YouTube at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PrfV\\_jWC8Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PrfV_jWC8Y) [Educational mini-documentary presenting the historical context of the Belle Époque and the artist's work];
- Casual to Confident Piano Player, 2022. Mel Bonis Scenes Infantines Pour Piano Op. 92 (An Analysis). [online video] Available on YouTube at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEmv8qY\\_gHg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEmv8qY_gHg) [A music-theoretical analysis of compositional and pedagogical structures in Bonis's piano miniatures].