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FEMININE CHARMS AND HONORARY MASCULINIZATION/DE-FEMINIZATION: GENDER AND THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE *VIRTUOSE*, 1815–1848

Abstract: This article discusses the work of 19th-century gender norms in the reception of contemporary piano *virtuose*, led by Clara Wieck Schumann and Marie Moke Pleyel. The discussion reveals telling discrepancies between the reception of the virtuose and their male colleagues, such as Liszt, who were mostly celebrated in hyper-masculine terms, as “heroes”, “gods”, and the like, while the virtuose were praised mainly on account of their visual appearance rather than virtuosic prowess, rejecting any comparison on an equal footing with the virtuosi. Finally, in a number of reviews, Wieck and Moke were explicitly proclaimed “honorary males” on account of their skills. This shows 19th-century gender norms at work, reserving excellence in any intellectual task to men, even when displayed by women.

Key words: virtuosity, virtuose, gender, 19th century

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In much of Europe and North America, the early to mid-19th century was, among other things, an age of virtuosity, not only in opera, where (vocal) virtuosity had been at home since at least the mid-17th century, but also of instrumental virtuosity, primarily on the violin and the piano. Carried by the two continents' expanding railway networks, the likes of Paganini, Liszt, and many others, who are largely forgotten today but were proto-music stars in their own day, crisscrossed Europe and North America, playing in a different city or town almost every day and bedazzling increasingly frenzied audiences. During his eight-year *Glanzzeit* alone, 1839–1847, Liszt played as many as one thousand recitals, which were, by the way, an invention of his own, in such far-off places as Dublin, Istanbul (before the Ottoman sultan), Lisbon, and Moscow, not to mention Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, Budapest, and a host of minor centres across Europe.

Hardly surprising, most of these virtuosi were men: not only Paganini and Liszt, but also Liszt's main rivals Sigismond Thalberg and Henri Herz and a host of today less familiar names: Pierre Baillot, Charles-August de Bériot, Alexander Dreyschock, István / Stephen Heller, Ferdinand Hiller, Frédéric Kalkbrenner, Friedrich Wilhelm Pixis, Emile Prudent, Ferdinand Ries, Pierre Rode, Henry Vieuxtemps, and Giovanni Battista Viotti, among others. However, no list of 19th-century virtuosi could claim to be complete without at least two *virtuose*: Clara Schumann, *née* Wieck and Marie Pleyel, *née* Moke, two of the greatest pianists of their time. However, as discussed in this article, whilst universally praised, Wieck and Moke were praised in fundamentally different terms than their male colleagues. Namely, while the *virtuosi* were praised in often quite bizarre, large-than-life, hyper-masculine terms, as “heroes”, “generals”, and even “gods”, in line with bourgeois “fantasies of omnipotence” seeing the virtuoso as a typical bourgeois free enterprising subject,¹ the *virtuose* were almost never commended for their professional accomplishment, but typically for their physical appearance or “feminine charms”, with little or no emphasis on their actual performance. Furthermore, and perhaps even more importantly, when they did receive praise as performers, it came at the price of an “honorary” masculinization or, at least, de-feminization, or, otherwise, they were commended as *female* pianists, commendable within their own little niche, but – it almost went without saying – unworthy of comparison with their male colleagues. As I argue below, all of this suggests that for 19th-century critics, the true virtuoso could only ever be male, even when she happened to be a woman. In turn, this would agree with that epoch's prevailing gender norms, which explicitly reserved activity in the public sphere and all kinds of intellectual excellence to men, circumscribing

¹ Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, 1.

women to passivity and domesticity. Accordingly, “exceptions” such as Wieck and Moke had to be rationalized as “honorary men” – anatomical women, but endowed with *masculine* intellectual power.

While Wieck’s reception as a *virtuosa* has received some scholarly treatment in musicology, possibly also due to her high standing as a composer (given that Western musical culture has privileged composition over performance since at least the 1830s) and association with Robert Schumann,² Moke, who did not compose, has received almost no attention at all. A notable exception is Katherine Ellis’s 1997 article “Female Pianists and Their Male Critics in Nineteenth-century Paris”, to which this paper is much indebted, but like most other studies of the contemporary reception of 19th-century *virtuose*, Ellis’s is restricted to only one (albeit a major) locale, while others discuss only a single figure (typically Wieck) or piece.³ By contrast, the topic of this article is the contemporary reception of Wieck *and* Moke as *the* two major *virtuose*, not only in Paris and London, but also in the German-speaking world, as exemplified by Europe’s leading music periodicals at the time: *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, *Neue Zeitung für Musik*, *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, *La France musicale*, and

² In my view, the most notable studies include Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2001 and Jennifer Caines, “Clara Schumann: The Man and Her Music; Gender Subversion in Nineteenth-century Concert Reviews”, *Fermata*, 2002, 4, 32–47.

³ Katherine Ellis, “Female Pianists and Their Male Critics in Nineteenth-century Paris”, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 1997, L/2–3, 353–385. Other similar pieces one should mention include Sarah McNeely, “Beyond the Drawing Room: The Musical Lives of Victorian Women”, *Nineteenth-century Gender Studies*, 2009, V/2; Therese Ellsworth, “Women Soloists and the Piano Concerto in Nineteenth-century London”, *Ad Parnasum: Journal of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-century Instrumental Music*, 2003, II/1, 21–49; Nicholas Salwey, “Women Pianists in Late Eighteenth-century London”, in: Joseph Orchard (ed.), *Concert Life in Eighteenth-century Britain*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, 273–290; Claudia Macdonald, “Critical Perception and the Woman Composer: The Early Reception of Piano Concertos by Clara Wieck Schumann and Amy Beach”, *Current Musicology*, 1993, 50, 24–55; Janina Klassen, “Clara Schumanns Klaviertrio op. 17: Gender code und Gender trouble?”, in: Arnfried Edler (ed.), *Die Kammermusik Clara und Robert Schumanns*, Hannover, Institut für Musikpädagogische Forschung der Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hannover, 22–29; Margarethe Engelhardt-Krajanek, “Die Schönsten Offenbarungen eines Weibes: Zwischen Sensationslust und Kunstsinn – Clara Schumann’s Konzerttätigkeit in Wien rezensiert von der Wiener Presse”, in: Ursula Simek and Elena Ostleitner (eds.), *Ich fahre in mein liebes Wien: Clara Schumann – Fakten, Bilder, Projektionen*, Vienna, Universität Wien, 1996, 31–40; and Imogen Fellingner, “Clara Wieck-Schumann als Komponistin im Spiegel zeitgenössischer Musikkritik”, in: Klaus Hortschansky (ed.), *Traditionen – Neuansätze: Für Amalie Abert (1906–1996)*, Tutzing, Hans Schneider, 1997, 273–279.

The Musical World.⁴ The remainder of the article begins with an overview of the reception of Liszt and other male virtuosi, to contextualize and contrast with it the reception of their female colleagues in the main, third part of the essay.

As already noted above, early-19th-century instrumental virtuosity was very much a man's world, not least due to the gender norms prevailing at the time. As is well known, the public sphere, acting in public, including (musical) performance, the arts and sciences, politics, and philosophy, and activity in general were regarded as the exclusive domain of men, while women's lot was the family, passivity, and domesticity in general; in Thaïs Morgan's words, in the 19th century, "women have no place in the public sphere".⁵ To a large extent, this applied to instrumental virtuosity as well, especially to violin virtuosity, which was simply off-limits to women in public and private performance alike, not only in the 19th, but also in the preceding two centuries. Musicologists and other scholars of 19th-century Western culture have often acknowledged that the violin was a forbidden instrument to women; Lawrence Kramer thus notes that even though "the violin in the nineteenth century [...] often represented feminine gracefulness, sentiment, or sensibility", "it was considered indecent for women to play the instrument".⁶ Maiko Kawabata, another musicologist as well as an able violinist herself who has probably produced the most interesting work regarding violin virtuosity, similarly notes that the violin "had long been considered an 'inappropriate' instrument for a woman", chiefly "because it was thought to compromise her decorum. Physical exertions that would have seemed natural, even desirable, among male performers were impermissible, transgressive when undertaken by females".⁷

Pace Kramer, Kawabata offers a rather compelling argument that this was precisely *because* the violin was gendered feminine. To put it simply, the 19th century's mandatory heterosexuality made it inappropriate for a woman to play a "feminine" instrument: "The violin was understood as a feminine agent, responding to (if victimized by) masculine control".⁸ By extension, Kawabata continues, the spectacle of (masculine) virtuosity on the (feminine) violin could be seen as a thinly veiled pornographic staging of (heterosexual) intercourse and

⁴ Henceforward abbreviated as *AMZ*, *NZM*, *RGMP*, *MF*, and *MW*.

⁵ Thaïs Morgan, "Victorian Effeminacies", in: Richard Dellamora (ed.), *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999, 113.

⁶ Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, 238.

⁷ Maiko Kawabata "Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance: Power, Military Heroism, and Gender (1789–1830), *19th-century Music*, 2004, XXVIII/2, 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*

insemination, performed by a virile virtuoso on the curvaceous body of the violin, by means of the newly redesigned – and thus re-phallicized, as it were – concave “Cramer” bow:

While the violin embodied a woman and ‘spoke’ in her voice, it was the long, hard, straight bow, an instrument of male power and domination, that brought her to sound. The function of the bow deepens its comparison with the sword [...], the sword being a symbol of masculine (phallic) power and an instrument for inflicting harm. [...] It was as if the player inseminated the body of the violin by assaulting it with the bow.⁹

Therefore, music in virtuosic violin performance might be described as the offspring of the (heterosexual) marriage of the male violinist and his feminine instrument, which, of course, automatically barred women from violin virtuosity.

As for men, they were typically described not as men of flesh and blood, but as visitors from Greco-Roman mythology and recent military history, for this was a world overpopulated by heroes and gods, Zeuses/Jupiters and Herculese, Caesars and Napoleons. Kawabata writes: “By the 1830s and into the 1840s it had become a commonplace to compare virtuosi with military rulers [...] solo violinists were understood to be emblematic of military heroism”.¹⁰ Post-Napoleonic violin virtuosity in Europe was “a culture of performers and audiences who understood violinists as emblems of military heroism. [...] Violinists [...] wielded their bows like swords and commanded armies of orchestral musicians, inviting comparison with military leaders, ancient and modern. Reviewers proclaimed them the Scipios, Alexanders, and Napoléons of the violin”.¹¹ Kawabata argues that these “heroic codes worked particularly well on the violin”,¹² due to the violin virtuoso’s necessarily upright and usually quite animated posture in performance, the military and phallic symbolism of the newly straightened and lengthened “Cramer” concave bow (as opposed to the old convex, or arched, design), and the perceived resemblance between orchestras led by violin virtuosi and armies commanded by their valiant military leaders.¹³ Also, as we saw above, the “Cramer” bow doubled up as not only a militaristic, but also as a potent phallic symbol: by wielding it on (against?) the high-pitched, curvaceous, “feminine” body of his violin, the male virtuoso could be viewed as “insemi-

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99–100.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90–91.

¹² *Ibid.*, 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 100–101.

nating” it so as to give birth to music, his masculinity “performed or even confirmed by the act of wielding and applying the bow”.¹⁴

Turning from the violin to the piano and virtuoso pianists, male and female alike, the picture grows more complex. Gendering the piano, a comparatively young instrument, proved more problematic. The violin was and to a large extent still is a handmade product of craftsmanship; to that extent, it is a highly individualist instrument – many a violin is said to be endowed with a “soul” of its own. By contrast, the piano was seen as a machine and product not so much of craftsmanship, but of industrial design and mass production, even at this early stage of its history. As a machine, Noah Adams notes, “it lacks much personality”;¹⁵ furthermore, the gender of a large and unwieldy machine was not as obvious to its 19th-century operators as that of the high-pitched, fragile, and curvy violin. The gender ambivalence of the piano *qua* machine raises interesting questions regarding its relationship with early-19th-century piano virtuosi and virtuose, which are addressed below. However, this ambivalence does not mean that the piano was not associated with one gender more than with the other: the instrument was closely associated with women. In Richard Leppert’s words, there was a “nearly universal association of the piano with women”.¹⁶

But paradoxically, as was already noted above, a vast majority of 19th-century virtuosi were men; in James Parakilas’s summary: “learning the piano has been like learning to cook: girls did it as a matter of course, whereas the relatively few boys who did it got the jobs and the glory. As a result, learning the piano has been a highly gender-specific activity, but specific to each gender in a different way”.¹⁷ The seeming paradox grows much less paradoxical when one remembers some of the basic tenets of 19th-century gender ideology, already mentioned above: the reservation of all activity, in the private and public sphere alike, including professional, public virtuosity, to men, and the confinement of women to domesticity in the guise of home-making, child-rearing, and a few species of “feminine accomplishments” deemed appropriate for a respectable, non-working-class lady. To be sure, some moderate command of the piano was certainly among the desirable accomplishments for middle- and upper-class ladies of a “marriageable age”, alongside painting, sewing, and the like. But

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁵ Noah Adams, “Introduction”, in: James Parakilas (ed.), *Piano Roles: Three Hundred Years of Life with the Piano*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2001, 1.

¹⁶ Richard Leppert, “Sexual Identity, Death, and the Family Piano”, *19th-century Music*, 1992, XVI/2, 14.

¹⁷ James Parakilas, “A History of Lessons and Practicing”, in: James Parakilas (ed.), *Piano Roles, op. cit.*, 116.

this was strictly non-public and therefore un-virtuosic music-making, where a “middle-class woman seated at the piano embodies refinement and accomplishment as she performs to friends, family, and potential husbands, who applaud and murmur their approval to one another”.¹⁸ In Lawrence Kramer’s characteristically biting summary: “A good bourgeois wife is always also a musician—but a bad one”.¹⁹

However, a bourgeois girl’s keyboard skills were more than a simple hobby or pastime: as an obligatory feminine accomplishment, they were a marker of respectable femininity; furthermore, inasmuch as a proficient girl’s “performance may earn her a husband”, one could argue, as Sarah McNeely has done, that pianistic virtuosity was part of a commodity exchange for men and women alike, since for the former it resulted in monetary remuneration, whereas for the latter marriage was the goal.²⁰ The crucial difference is that for most women, piano skills were not an avenue towards a professional career in public pianistic virtuosity, but only to a more or less rewarding marriage. And as soon as that goal was reached, the newly wed lady’s pianism usually came to an end, replaced by the more pressing duties of home-making and child-rearing. Accordingly, neither of the two major 19th-century virtuose were married at the time of their greatest successes on the virtuoso circuit: Marie Moke Pleyel divorced the pianist, publisher, and piano-maker Camille Pleyel in 1836 and Clara Wieck Schumann made a name for herself whilst still single, performed, for a while, with her husband, and resumed her brilliant career upon Robert Schumann’s incapacitation in 1854.

By contrast, their male colleagues had an almost free rein in the world of contemporary piano virtuosity, celebrated as conquerors of pianos, which were usually somehow gendered feminine (more on which below), audiences, orchestras (if present), and other virtuosi. Thus an unknown critic writing for the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1839 extolled Thalberg as a “hero of pianism”.²¹ As for his archrival Liszt, harmonies apparently sprang out of his hands “just like Minerva out of Jupiter’s head”.²² Reporting from Berlin on the pages of the *Revue et Gazette*, Ludwig Rellstab likens the young Vieuxtemps, still in his teens, to “Hercules in the cradle”.²³ The same journal repeatedly carried rhapsodic and

¹⁸ Sarah McNeely, “Beyond the Drawing Room”, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath*, *op. cit.*, 172.

²⁰ McNeely, “Beyond the Drawing Room”, *op. cit.*

²¹ Unsigned, “Lieder und Gesänge”, *NZM*, 1 February 1829, 69.

²² Unsigned, “Vermischtes”, *NZM*, 12 April 1841, 122.

²³ L. Rellstab, “Correspondence particulière. État de la musique à Berlin”, *RGMP*, 24 June 1838, 264.

somewhat even eroticized descriptions of Liszt as, in Heine's words, "transported, thunderous, volcanic, fiery like a Titan".²⁴ In a somewhat later issue, Henri Blanchard, a prominent Parisian critic and co-editor of the *Revue et Gazette*, dubbed Liszt "the Pompey, the [Mark] Anthony, the Moreau²⁵ of the piano" and Thalberg "the Caesar, the Octavian, or the Napoleon".²⁶

It must be emphasized here that critics typically extolled virtuosi not simply for outdoing a rival, demonstrating superb skill at the piano, blending with the orchestra in perfect harmony, or performing a piece of music exquisitely; rather, they were extolled for *defeating* their rivals, *beating* their pianos into submission, *subjecting* their orchestras to their will, and *vanquishing* the most demanding virtuosic pieces. Thus, writing in his own *Neue Zeitschrift* in 1840, Robert Schumann described Liszt's performance of Weber's famous *Concertstück* in terms of a military victory over the work and the orchestra: "As Liszt seizes the piece, with such power and greatness in expression, as if it were a charging platoon on the battlefield, so he charges from one minute to the next, rising until a point where he stands at the head of the orchestra and leads it jubilantly. At that point he appeared like a general, and the applause, in its power, was not unlike 'Vive l'empereur'".²⁷ Writing along the same lines, Johann Ludwig Gebhard von Alvensleben (1816–1895), a friend and collaborator of Schumann's, aristocrat, composer, conductor, singer, and poet, describes for the *Neue Zeitschrift* Liszt's 1842 recitals at the Berlin opera as "an opportunity to prove his triumphant forces in a battle with an accompanying orchestra and choir". Apparently, it was another battle that Liszt won singlehandedly, since "he invariably emerged as a brilliant conqueror, now and then reining in the orchestra and charging ahead with it".²⁸

Faced with an orchestra outnumbering him by at least 25 to one, the virile virtuoso comes across as even more heroic than he would have done in a solo recital: not only does the orchestra take nothing away from his brilliance, but rather, its docile members add to his larger-than-life image by obediently submitting to his awesome power. That is why the piano concerto has been described as "the metaphor of the isolated and individualized hero against the collective identity of the orchestra". Hence also the link between virtuoso pianists and their concerti and "warriors and warfare".²⁹ Similarly, Kawabata has noted the "martial spirit"

²⁴ Henri Heine, "Lettres confidentielles. II", *RGMP*, 4 February 1838, 43

²⁵ Jean Victor Marie Moreau (1763–1813), a renowned French republican general.

²⁶ Henri Blanchard, "Soirée de musique sacrée chez madame la princesse de Belgiojoso. Matinée musicale donnée par M. Liszt.", *RGMP*, 26 April 1840, 284

²⁷ R. S., "Franz Liszt", *NZM*, 10 April 1840, 119.

²⁸ VIII, "Aus Berlin. Februar–März", *NZM*, 22 April 1842, 130.

²⁹ Richard Leppert and Stephen Zank, "The Concert and the Virtuoso", in: James Parakilas

of early-19th-century violin concerti.³⁰ However, the piano virtuoso's feat was even greater than that of his violin counterpart, for he had not only an orchestra to "rein in", but also an imposing, large, and heavy instrument to tame, three or four times his size and weight, rather than the small and (seemingly) docile body of a violin. But their size notwithstanding, pianos were often gendered feminine as well, just like the violin, as the strange use of the feminine definite article and pronoun makes explicit in this review of Liszt's pianism found in *La France musicale*: "The piano [*La piano*], this soulless instrument, has found a new language; at times, she [*elle*] might assume a passionate manner, or deploy, in a fiery brilliant passage, her most charming coquetry".³¹ Perhaps an act whereby a (hyper-)masculine virtuoso beats his instrument into submission could only be conceived of as heterosexual and the docile instrument as feminine. Faced alone with an unwieldy, intimidating – and yet feminine – machine, he succeeds singlehandedly in bringing it under his control, and then exploits it to beat an entire orchestra into submission. That is why piano virtuosos like Liszt, imperiously holding their own before a large machine-like instrument and an orchestra, could serve as figures for, as Dana Gooley has put it, "fantasies of omnipotence: over pianos, women, and concert-audiences".³² But as far as most 19th-century critics were concerned, that figure could only ever be male.

In the brief passage just quoted above, Gooley mentions Liszt's perceived omnipotence not only over pianos, but also over "women and concert audiences". Katherine Ellis, too, notes that "a quasi-sexual possession of the audience was an integral and necessary part of the performance."³³

Thus a contributor to the *Revue et Gazette* signed "S***" simply states that the initially reserved audience at a recital that Liszt gave with Berlioz "was *vanquished* [emphasis in the original]".³⁴ Likewise, the audience at an 1839 Vienna recital: "Liszt's audiences are a special kind of audience, because he makes them *his own*. For him, his audience has but one soul; they feel and think with him".³⁵

(ed.), *Piano Roles*, *op. cit.*, 239.

³⁰ Maiko Kawabata, "Virtuoso Codes of Violin Performance", *op. cit.*, 99.

³¹ [Léon] Escudier, "Concert de Listz [*sic*]", *FM*, 21 April 1844, 125.

³² Dana Gooley, "Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso as Strategist", in: William Weber (ed.), *The Musician as Entrepreneur, 1700–1914: Managers, Charlatans, and Idealists*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2004, 1.

³³ Katherine Ellis, "Female Pianists", *op. cit.*, 357.

³⁴ S***, "Concert de MM. Berlioz et Liszt", *RGMP*, 25 December 1836, 464.

³⁵ G. Saphir, "Franz Liszt, après son premier concert du 9 décembre 1839, à Vienne", *RGMP*, 12 December 1839, 531.

Finally, before moving on to Liszt's female colleagues, we must briefly consider the music itself, as it were. For, likewise was music described as "conquered", "vanquished", and "subjugated", when performed by the likes of Liszt (but not, as we shall see below, when performed by Moke or Wieck with comparable virtuosity). And it must be noted here that music, too, just like Liszt's audiences, was in this context gendered feminine. Richard Leppert asserts: "There can be no question about the cultural associations between music and the feminine in Victorian culture";³⁶ "at least since the eighteenth century, music and femininity were viewed interchangeably".³⁷ We already witnessed above Schumann's impression of Liszt's "seizing" of Weber's *Concertstück*, which made Liszt appear "like a general". In violin virtuosity, although Kawabata situates the prevalence of militaristic discourse in its critical reception only in the 1830s and '40s, we find the German-French violinist and composer Ludwig/Louis Spohr (1784–1859) praised in similar terms as early as an 1818 issue of the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, for an excellent performance of his own A-major violin concerto in Amsterdam: "All the difficulties, no fewer in the first and final movements [than in the second], he conquered with an admirable ease".³⁸ Similarly, writing under his penname "Paul Smith", Édouard Monnais, *feuilletoniste* and administrator of various Parisian theaters, in a review of an 1841 Liszt performance of his *Grand galop chromatique*, one of Liszt's "warhorses" of virtuosic display, described the event in terms of Liszt's *triumph* over his own piece: "The trial is decided: the artist has emerged victorious and will not share his victory with anyone".³⁹ Here was the spectacle of music brought under the hyper-masculine virtuoso's control.

Given so much testosterone, Katherine Ellis rightly asks: "What place was there for women within such a system?"⁴⁰ Indeed, some critics were adamant that women had no business in instrumental virtuosity. For instance, reviewing a concert performance by Marie Moke Pleyel, banker, composer, and Schumann's correspondent Carl von Kaskel (1797–1874) cautioned all ladies in his friend's journal to shun the obviously masculine world of virtuosity: "May the ladies [...] swiftly and willingly leave the mounting of battle-horses to the manly heroes and bring us the pretty image of **musical peace!** May they bring us the **dignified,**

³⁶ Richard Leppert, "Sexual Identity", *op. cit.*, 122.

³⁷ Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 155.

³⁸ Unsigned, "Nachrichten, Amsterdam", *AMZ*, 14 January 1818, 33.

³⁹ Paul Smith, "Matinée musicale donnée par M. Liszt, dans les salons d'Érard", *RGMP*, 18 April 1841, 225.

⁴⁰ Katherine Ellis, "Feminine Pianists", *op. cit.*, 357.

pleasant, and **noble**, and provide us with the subtlety, spirit, and natural simplicity, which are the beautiful preferences of their sex [emphasis original]”.⁴¹ But as we are about to see, contemporary reviews suggest that there indeed was a place for women in 19th-century instrumental virtuosity, but a carefully circumscribed one. It is probably little surprising that in “a period in which our modern oppositions of masculinity and femininity [...] were formed”,⁴² the critical reception of virtuose offers a rather different picture from the reception of their male colleagues, even though they often performed the same virtuosic repertory as did the virtuosi, with comparable virtuosic prowess. Almost needless to say, there is no mention of gods and heroes and their triumphs, or vanquished pianos, subdued orchestras, and conquered music. Overall, most of the reviews, even when otherwise positive, issue from a rather condescending general attitude towards women, their abilities and capacities, in music and beyond.

Thus Alsatian composer and music critic Jean-Georges/Johann Georg Kastner (1810–1867) sums up for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* his impression of one of the recitals that Clara Wieck gave on her 1837 tour of Paris in the following terms: “We will say it all if we admit that we have never before heard a maiden of such dexterity”.⁴³ Similarly, the unsigned reviewer of a Marie Moke recital in London, a part of her hugely successful 1846 tour of England, praises her skill (as most of his colleagues did), but takes care to keep her in her designated place, as a *female* musician: “With a force and a certainty which recall the best pianists in their prime, Madame Pleyel has still something of her own sex, – an elegance and fascination which place her apart from all men; and superior, we have no hesitation in asserting, to every other female instrumentalist we have hitherto heard. [...] Her self-control (a very rare gift among women) is perfect”.⁴⁴ Incidentally, the issue of self-control never comes up in reviews of male virtuosi, not even of the most animated among them, such as Liszt or Paganini. The main point of the quoted passage, though, is that however superb a virtuosa might be, some borders could not be crossed: she could only be assessed by comparison to other virtuose, but not to her male colleagues. The unsigned reviewer of a *Revue et Gazette* concert that, among others, also featured Moke, would probably agree, given his description of the pianist as “this woman who has no rival among women and with whom artists of the opposite sex *would be* honoured to be compared [emphasis added]”; as the critic’s use of the condition-

⁴¹ v. L., “Mad. Marie Pleyel”, *NZM*, 6 December 1839, 183.

⁴² Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath*, *op. cit.*, 15.

⁴³ G. Kastner, “Nachrichten, *Paris*”, *AMZ*, 21 May 1839, 406–7.

⁴⁴ Unsigned, “Reception of Madame Pleyel by the English Press”, *MW*, 23 May 1846, 239–241.

al tense implies, comparing Moke to her male rivals would be highly unusual, her great skill and talent notwithstanding.⁴⁵ Similarly, the anonymous contributor to the *Musical World* asserts that Moke is “unrivalled—she is unapproachable”; but: “We shall not speak of the masculine players, such as Liszt, Thalberg, and Mendelssohn, or even Chopin, Döhler, Dreyschock, Emile Prudent, &c. But of the female executants, Madame Pleyel [*née* Moke] is the Liszt”.⁴⁶ To put it bluntly, it simply appears that men may be good pianists, whereas women could only be good *female* pianists.

Another key common feature of these performance reviews is that they seldom say anything substantial about the performances themselves. Unlike reviews of Liszt and other virtuosi’s triumphs over their instruments, orchestras, audiences, and pieces of music, reviews of Wieck’s and Moke’s performances are almost silent about the details of their virtuosity. Instead, their authors almost invariably chose to focus on their physical appearance. Thus, for instance, the following rhapsody on Moke from Henri Blanchard: “Her eye is as inspired as it inspires; her talent is suave and sweet and at the same time energetic. As she piles up, with her beautiful hands, the storms that explode on the keyboard with tumultuous effects, her look is calm and serene”.⁴⁷ Compare that to Blanchard’s impression of Thalberg’s performance during the same evening, described in the same article: “Thalberg is the king of pianists [...] To make the piano sing is a problem that he has resolved. One of his best qualities is the way he commands attention, how he makes himself be heard”.⁴⁸ No mention of Thalberg’s aristocratic appearance at the piano, his famous poise whilst performing the most virtuosic feats; instead, Blanchard duly describes specific qualities of the pianist’s virtuosity. Not so in his treatment of Wieck or Moke; here we find him again in his rhapsodic mode, this time with a distinctly erotic note, as if speaking to and courting the pianist directly: “what I admire in you above all is the noble sentiment, the living understanding of the art; it is this intimate and boundless poetry that shows in the fire of your look, in the expression of your face, in the deep, pleasant sonorities that flow from your fingers, in your entire person, in the movement of your lips, in the graceful swaying of your head”.⁴⁹ Although one could also find eroticized critical responses to male virtuosi, such as Hei-

⁴⁵ Unsigned, “Concert donné par La Revue et Gazette musicale”, *RGMP*, 19 March 1848, 85.

⁴⁶ Unsigned, “Reception of Madame Pleyel”, *MW*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ Henri Blanchard, “Théâtre-Italien. Mme Pleyel et M. Thalberg”, *RGMP*, 6 April 1845, 105.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Henri Blanchard, “Concerts”, *RGMP*, 13 April 1851, 113.

nrich Heine's descriptions of Liszt, they hardly go quite as far as Blanchard's thinly veiled love letter to Moke. Moreover, even when reviewers do indulge in describing the physical appearance of male virtuosi, they typically focus on the virtuoso's sheer power as a source of his virtuosity, which is then duly discussed in some detail at least, as Blanchard does with Thalberg in the review quoted above. By contrast, when virtuose such as Wieck and Moke were concerned, as Blanchard again shows, the visual spectacle of a woman exhibiting herself on-stage typically eclipsed the very purpose of the spectacle – her virtuosity.

As Katherine Ellis has already noted, the prime target of this “roving eye” class of criticism was Marie Moke, not least due to her beauty, as well as owing to a somewhat flirtatious manner on – and offstage.⁵⁰ The already cited review written by Adolphe Adam and published in an 1845 issue of *La France musicale* is a case in point: “How beautiful Mrs. Pleyel is when she at the piano! It is not enough to hear her, one must also see her”.⁵¹ This fascination with Moke's looks culminated on the pages of *The Musical World*, during her hugely successful tour of Britain and Ireland in 1846. Thus we read that the “aspect of the muse inspired”.⁵² Another review for *The Musical World* went even further, happily neglecting to write a word about Moke's performance: “I had never seen Madame Pleyel before this moment, and her appearance at once satisfied all my expectations. Nothing can be more prepossessing, nothing more picturesque. Madame Pleyel is considerably above the middle height; her figure is slight, but beautifully proportioned; her hair dark, and arranged *en bandeaux*, with two simple flowers for ornament; her forehead compact and intellectual; her eyes a deep blue, instinct with a kind of mysterious light, and full of meaning; her mouth defies description, from its ever-changing expression; and the whole *contour* of her face rivals the most wonderful of those perfect fancies with which the canvases of Raphael and Guido teem. Such a face indicates the great artist at a glance. Madame Pleyel was dressed in a *robe noir*, distinguishable alike for simplicity and taste. But you will ask me what has Madame Pleyel the woman to do with Madame Pleyel the pianist—to which I can only reply, you must see her, and judge for yourself”.⁵³ And another contributor to the *Musical World* preferred to focus on a specific part of Moke's physique: “Her foot – what has her foot to do with the matter? – never mind, the word has escaped us, and we snatch at the opportunity of speaking enthusiastically of *le pied le plus mignon, le plus joli, de l'univers* – her foot, then, which [...] peeps in and out from under

⁵⁰ Katherine Ellis, “Female Pianists”, *op. cit.*, 357.

⁵¹ Ad. Adam, “Concert de Mme Pleyel”, *FM*, 13 April 1845, 114.

⁵² Unsigned, “Madame Pleyel”, *MW*, 14 March 1846, 124.

⁵³ D. G. W., “Music in Dublin”, *MW*, 16 May 1846, 225.

her robe, like a little mouse from its hole [...]”.⁵⁴ Such outbursts could hardly be found in the contemporary criticism of male virtuosi.

Even when approaching the ridiculous, as it does here, this focus on the virtuose’s “feminine charms” and not on their prowess in performance helped maintain the gender boundaries of 19th-century European respectability: for, even though some remarkable women such as Wieck and Moke were allowed to display their excellence and have independent careers, they were demonstrably not treated as their male colleagues’ equals, let alone allowed to compete with them, while their accomplishments were enjoyed more as pleasant accoutrements of bourgeois culture than intellectually appreciated or criticized. That is also why their critics seemingly treated them with so much more benevolence (albeit of a condescending kind) than their male colleagues.

But as Foucault taught us, 19th-century “‘bourgeois’ society [...] was a society of blatant and fragmented perversions”;⁵⁵ its normative gender boundaries were much more porous than the criticism of virtuosity discussed so far might have us believe: the examples of such women as George Sand and, as I am about to argue, her contemporaries Wieck and Moke suggest otherwise. One index of the fluidity of 19th-century gender boundaries and identities is the readiness with which supposedly masculine traits were attributed to women and vice versa. Christopher Parker thus asserts: “There is no doubt that Victorians had a clear idea of what constituted appropriate qualities of femininity and masculinity, but they were quite willing to ascribe ‘feminine’ characteristics to men and ‘masculine’ characteristics to women, suggesting a fair amount of unease about gender roles once the issue had been opened”.⁵⁶ The critical reception of Clara Wieck and Marie Moke suggests that this “honorary masculinization” was the greatest compliment a *virtuosa* could receive from her male critics. Thus we find, for instance, a critic writing for *The Musical World*, signed only as “R.”, assert that Moke “is certainly a great, a wonderful artist. Never for one instant does she allow you to think that a female, and not a male pianist is at work”.⁵⁷ Similarly, an unsigned reviewer in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* dubs Moke the “female Liszt”.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Unsigned, “Madame Pleyel”, *MW*, 23 May 1846, 237.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality – Volume 1: An Introduction*, New York, Vintage Books, 1990, 47.

⁵⁶ Christopher Parker, “Chapter One: Introduction”, in: Christopher Parker (ed.), *Gender Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Literature*, Aldershot, Scholar Press, 1995, 11.

⁵⁷ R., “Madame Pleyel at Manchester”, *MW*, 13 June 1846, 273.

⁵⁸ Unsigned, “Wien. Musikalische Chronik des virten Vierteljahres 1839”, *AMZ*, 29 January 1840, 91.

It is clear, then, that in this instance of “honorary masculinization”, masculinity was used to confer value on a feminine artist, at the expense of an implicitly (and often explicitly) devalued femininity. Moke is a “female Liszt”, simply too good for a woman and therefore closer to a man, her feminine charms notwithstanding. In Katherine Ellis’s view, the secret of Moke’s success was her staying within the bounds of normative femininity in all but her virtuosity: in her visual persona she fully embraced her womanhood, but in her performances she demonstrated a degree of power more readily expected of men. In effect, it was a masculine-sounding virtuosity coming from an unambiguously female body:

Among women pianists, she was exceptional in that she turned *herself* into an honorary man, rather than waiting for her critics to decide that such elevated status was appropriate. [...] Critical response reveals that Pleyel achieved the seemingly impossible, donning masculine identity, claiming that gender was irrelevant to art, and using the sexuality of her stage presence to break down male resistance. [...] It is therefore not so much that Pleyel ‘has no gender’, as that she embodies maleness and femaleness together.⁵⁹

But compare that to Henri Blanchard’s outburst that Marie Moke “is more than a man, more than a great artist, this is more than a pretty woman; *she has no sex when she is at the piano* [emphasis added]”.⁶⁰ One could hardly find a more explicit instance of an honorary de-feminization, as it were. Blanchard is clear: when Moke is at the piano, “she has no sex”. Finally, Ellis concludes that Moke “did not, by taking on male characteristics, cease to be a true woman”.⁶¹ That may be so: unlike George Sand, she certainly refrained from smoking cigars, talking politics, and wearing trousers; but still, *pace* Ellis, Blanchard’s and other reviews discussed above show that her critics simply could not bring themselves to accept such a powerful pianist as a “mere” woman, despite all of her feminine charms, purported coquetry, and undeniable beauty. A virtuosity of such masculine power and, more generally, such a degree of artistic excellence, were simply not compatible with a female body: therefore Moke had to be masculinized or at least de-sexed, if only onstage. The binary relationship between masculinity as value and femininity as inferiority had to be preserved at all costs. The virtuoso had to be male, even when she happened to be a woman.

The hyper-masculine discourse in the contemporary critical reception of early- to mid-19th-century (male) virtuosi, coupled with the contemporary reception of their female colleagues, with its condescending focus on their visual

⁵⁹ Katherine Ellis, “Female Pianists”, *op. cit.*, 376–377.

⁶⁰ Henri Blanchard, “Coup de l’œil musical sur les Concerts de la semaine et de la saison”, *RGMP*, 2 February 1845, 38.

⁶¹ Katherine Ellis, “Feminine Pianists”, *op. cit.*, 377.

appearance, away from their sheer virtuosity, and refusal to discuss the *virtuose* on a par with the *virtuosi*, thus refusing to countenance the possibility that women could be equally accomplished in an intellectual activity as men, suggests a somewhat depressing conclusion: that the virtuosity of such figures as Wieck and Moke, at least in their critical reception (by male critics), whilst launching a few women to pan-European fame, actually served to keep the general category of woman as well as normative gender relations in their place: artistic excellence had to be gendered male and inferiority female, whether they actually occurred in (anatomical) men or women. Hence the honorary masculinization and de-feminization of 19th-century *virtuose* in contemporary criticism, all the praise and critical rapture notwithstanding.