



MARIE JAËLL

SPHINX

for piano

ÆI edition

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(1884)

edited by Kian Ravaei

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AEI edition

PREFACE

Born in 1846 as Marie Trautmann, Jaëll was a child piano prodigy who performed her first concert at age nine, earning immediate recognition for her precocious talent.¹ She was already an accomplished musician when she married the pianist Alfred Jaëll, fourteen years her senior, in 1866.² While many women of this period were expected to give up their artistic careers upon marrying, Marie Jaëll did the opposite. Alfred Jaëll, who was gaining an international reputation as a leading interpreter of Chopin and Brahms,³ often played two-piano pieces with his wife during concert tours. Their virtuosic repertoire included Saint-Saëns' *Variations on a Theme of Beethoven*, which was dedicated to the couple.⁴ Meanwhile, Marie Jaëll continued to advance her own career, becoming the first French pianist to perform all thirty-two Beethoven sonatas, and the first pianist to perform the complete works of Liszt, a close friend of both Jaëlls.⁵ In her numerous pedagogical writings, Jaëll pioneered a science-backed method for piano playing that integrated anatomy and psychology, prioritizing economy of motion.⁶

Her first compositions, written in 1871, caught the attention of Saint-Saëns, who remained her close friend, collaborator, and mentor.⁷ Saint-Saëns dedicated his First Piano Concerto to Marie Jaëll, and *Sphinx* is only one among several compositions Jaëll dedicated to him, which include her First Piano Concerto and a piano piece entitled *Prisme, Problèmes en musique*.⁸ The death of her husband in 1882 proved a watershed moment in her life, leading to an intensified focus on composition.⁹ She spent the following three years going back and forth between Paris and Weimar, doing secretarial work for Liszt while composing her Second Piano Concerto—a tremendous critical success—and *Sphinx*.¹⁰ Saint-Saëns, along with Gabriel Fauré, would later recommend her for admission to the *Société des compositeurs de musique*, making her one of the first and only women to gain membership.¹¹ Except for a short orchestral piece composed in 1917, and a handful of

pedagogical works, Jaëll concluded her composition career in 1894, devoting her remaining thirty-one years to her writings on piano playing.¹²

Sphinx was published in the 1885 *Album du Gaulois*, a book of short piano pieces published by the French daily newspaper *Le Gaulois*. While the album was primarily a money-making endeavor for the financially unstable newspaper, part of the proceeds were donated to the relief fund of the *Société des artistes musiciens*.¹³ The album featured new works by established international composers—including Clara Schumann, Dvořák, Fauré, Franck, Grieg, Liszt, Rubinstein, Saint-Saëns, and Tchaikovsky—as well as emerging French composers like Jaëll. As the album was made available for sale in December 1884,¹⁴ the true composition date of *Sphinx* is 1884, not 1885 as some sources¹⁵ erroneously state.

The musical style of *Sphinx* reaches beyond the French romanticism of her contemporaries, encapsulating a kind of proto-minimalism which Jaëll would continue to explore in her hour-long piano cycle *18 pièces pour piano d'après la lecture de Dante*.¹⁶ Launay and Pasler argue that Jaëll may have been inspired by Saint-Saëns' "Tournoiement, songe d'opium" from *Mélodies persanes*, which like *Sphinx* obsessively repeats a four-note motive.¹⁷ Jaëll, however, takes this idea a step further, never transposing her four-note motive as Saint-Saëns does, but rather keeping the pitches fixed while the surrounding harmonies provide an ever-changing background.

In an article which Jaëll published in the influential French music journal *Le Ménestrel* two years after composing *Sphinx*, she discusses links between music and divinity, noting "the infinite in the life of rhythm" and other ideas which may have motivated her novel approach to repetition.¹⁸ The inspiration for the work's title remains unclear, but an 1879 letter from the French general, scientist, and musician Parmentier may hold the answer.

“I am trying to make you out, or at least I am not unduly trying, since I know that you wouldn't care to have the sphinx which dwells inside you to be capable of being explained. [...] Yet something nevertheless remains unchanging in you, the fundamental core even of your character, which provides you with such an original and distinctive individuality.”¹⁹

Parmentier invokes the idea of the sphinx's mysterious, unsolvable riddle and juxtaposes it with something elemental and immutable—an apt metaphor for the musical dialectic in Jaëll's composition.

To establish the text, I referred to the edition in *Album du Gaulois* as well as a digital facsimile of the holograph manuscript, which is publicly available on the website of the Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg. This facsimile contains three versions of *Sphinx*, each with significant musical differences. The version closest to the published edition has a pencil marking above the title which says “Version publiée dans ‘L'Album du Gaulois,’” suggesting that the two other texts may not be earlier composition attempts, but rather alternative and equally valid versions. In fact, the only commercially available recording of *Sphinx* uses one of these versions rather than the one published in *Album du Gaulois*.²⁰ However, since the *Album du Gaulois* version is the only one which has been published, it serves as the primary source for establishing the text in this critical edition. For those who wish to examine the alternative versions for themselves, citations are produced in the commentary.

Since it is unknown whether Jaëll had the opportunity to proofread the first edition, my text generally privileges the holograph manuscript, excepting situations where the first edition clearly corrects a mistake in the manuscript. There are two major discrepancies between the manuscript and printed edition, the first being that all written markings in the former are German and in the latter French. Jaëll was born in the linguistically mixed French Alsace, later

annexed by Germany, and spoke both German and French fluently.²¹ Therefore, I have incorporated both the German and French translations into the score. The second discrepancy is the greater number of pedal markings in the printed edition, which I have disregarded on the assumption that they may be editorial.

Kian Ravaei
April 5, 2025

NOTES

¹ Launay, Florence, and Jane Pasler, “*Le Maître* and the ‘Strange Woman,’ Marie Jaëll: Two Virtuoso-Composers in Resonance,” in *Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*, ed. Jane Pasler (Princeton University Press, 2012), 86.

² Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 87.

³ Bernnat, Andreas, “Jaëll” in *MGG Online*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://o-www-mgg--online-com.library.juilliard.edu/mgg/stable/536002>.

⁴ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 87.

⁵ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 86.

⁶ Leuchtman, Horst, and Charles Timbrell, “Jaëll [née Trautmann], Marie” in *Grove Music Online*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://o-www-oxfordmusiconline-com.library.juilliard.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000014092>.

⁷ Guichard, Catherine, *Marie Jaëll: The Magic Touch, Piano Music by Mind Training* (Algora Publishing, 2004), 56.

⁸ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 91.

⁹ Horst and Timbrell, “Jaëll [née Trautmann], Marie.”

¹⁰ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 86.

¹¹ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 96.

¹² Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 95.

¹³ Sundkvist, Luis, “I would like something very poetic and at the same time very simple, intimate and human!”: Previously unknown or unidentified letters by Tchaikovsky to correspondents from Russia, Austria and France,” in *Tchaikovsky Research Bulletin*, accessed April 5, 2025, <http://www.tchaikovsky-research.net/files/TRBulletin02.pdf>, 45.

¹⁴ Sundkvist, “Tchaikovsky,” 45.

¹⁵ Bernnat, “Jaëll.”

¹⁶ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 94.

¹⁷ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 94.

¹⁸ Jaëll, Marie, “Le divin dans la musique,” *Ménestrel*, November 7, 1886, 393.

¹⁹ Joseph Charles Théodore Parmentier to Marie Jaëll, August 22, 1879, quoted in Marie-Laure Ingelaere, “Marie Jaëll through the Eyes of her Correspondents,” liner notes for *Marie Jaëll: Musique symphonique & Musique pour piano*, Bru Zane ES1022RSK, released January 22, 2016, 100.

²⁰ Irsen, Cora, pianist, *Marie Jaëll: Complete Works for Piano Vol. 3*, Querstand VKJK1607, released July 1, 2016.

²¹ Launay and Pasler, “*Le Maître*,” 91.

dédié à St. Saëns

Sphinx

Marie Jaëll

Durchweg frei, rhapsodisch vorzutragen [Calme avec recueillement (♩ = 76)]
Ruhig und ernst [exécution libre et rhapsodique]

PIANO.

mf — *f* *pp* *pp*

u.c.

Red. * *Red.* * [*p*] *Red.* * *Red.* * *Red.* *

mf *pp* *mf* *pp*

Red. *

12 *rasch* [le double plus vite]

long *pp*

19 *langsamer* *Tempo I^{mo}*
[retenu] [1^{er} mouv^t]

p

26 *langsamer* *rasch* [très vite]
[lent]

p

Red. *

32 *cresc.*

rit.....
[retenu]

37 *sehr langsam [très lentement] lungo*

f

44 *so rasch als möglich [aussi vite que possible]*

ppp
[ppp]

49

54

59 *langsam [lent]* *Tempo I^{mo} [1^{er} mouv^t]*

ppp *mf* *pp* u.c.

67

72

77

82

88

COMMENTARY

SOURCES

E.....First edition, printed in *Album Du Gaulois*, 1885. Notable differences from the holograph manuscript include the use of French rather than German expressive markings, as well as additional pedal indications.

A₁.....Digital facsimile of holograph manuscript, in Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg manuscript collection, 1885, <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc1122799/cb36>. Labelled “Version publiée dans ‘L’Album du Gaulois’.”

A₂ and A₃.....Digital facsimile of holograph manuscript, in Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg manuscript collection, 1885, <https://archivesetmanuscrits.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc1122799/cb36>. Significant differences from E and A₁ to the point of being considered different versions of the piece; not used for establishing the critical text.

NOTES

- 2, beat 3: A₁ shows letter p under LH, unclear
- 21: unclear hairpin placement in A₁
- 24, beat 2: no staccato in E, probably an error
- 33, beat 1: lower voice in LH shown as a quarter note in A₁
- 44: *ppp* only in E
- 47–8: tie missing in A₁
- 52–7: no accents in A₁
- 66, beat 3: accents only in A₁
- 67 & 70: ambiguous placement of t.c. in A₁
- 72–3: no slur in A₁
- 75: no accent in A₁
- 77: no down-stem voice in A₁, only the grace note
- 88, beat 4: no *p* in A₁
- 88, beat 7: no *ff* in A₁
- 89: no *ff* in E

