

Ekstasis Duo's debut album, "Women's Voices," springs from a realization that neither Eliran nor I had ever been assigned music by women during our student days. Eager to explore this new undiscovered terrain, we looked at several works and were delighted to find many masterpieces. This disc begins in the Classical language of Louise Farrenc, continues through the Romantic styles of Clara Schumann, Ethel Smyth, and Alma Mahler, and brings the listener up to the modern day with selections by Lera Auerbach, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, and song transcriptions arranged for us by Dan Kaufman, originally sung by Nina Simone.

Louise Farrenc, Sonata in B-flat major, op. 46, 1859

Louise Farrenc's cello sonata in B-flat major offers the duo partnership a fascinating opportunity to play in a late Classical style with hints of early Romantic gestures. Unlike most Parisians of the time, Farrenc eschewed the popular light operetta, preferring to hear and also perform piano music of the previous century. As a dynamo on her instrument, she spared nothing when writing her challenging piano parts. We can hear this Classical preference, reminiscent of Beethoven, Mozart, and perhaps some Schumann as well, in the elegant counterpoint between instruments, the complex writing for piano, and the numerous examples of higher register passagework for the cello. She spun supremely beautiful melodies in this three-movement work, well-organized around her harmonic plan, and threw an occasional curveball, like the stormy minor moment towards the end of the first movement.

Lera Auerbach, 24 Preludes, op. 47, no. 7 and 24, 1999

In this work, Russian-born Auerbach looks back upon the collection of major and minor preludes that Bach wrote in his Well-Tempered Clavier, and gives us a modern take on the genre. In her collection, we hear the sounds of the city – the screech of a car tire, someone wailing, and perhaps the rapid and windy chug of a train. Most of Auerbach's preludes are short and enigmatic, demanding us to respond with our own imaginative stories. Performers may feel like rock musicians when tackling the final driving prelude, which incorporates motifs from each of the previous preludes and requires great endurance and power.

Clara Schumann, Three Romances, op. 22, nos. 1-3, 1853

Clara Schumann famously despaired that "women are not born to compose" because not one woman has ever succeeded. That she had such a limited output of compositions is truly a shame for a lover of the Romantic style. Her music flows with an unalloyed pleasure of lavish harmonies, sensuous melodies, and deeply felt emotions. Robert and Clara Schumann were known to compose together and one might assume that they had very similar styles. However, in this set of three Romances, we clearly hear her own voice, a combination of fretful anxiety and single-minded determination. There is also a subtle and often unsatisfied yearning, suggested by

the delayed harmonic arrivals, long slurs, and complex ornamentation. Her impeccable craft, honed by long lonely hours at the keyboard from a very early age, shines throughout this work.

Alma Mahler, *Die stille Stadt*, 1900-1901

Alma Mahler was a budding composer before she met her first husband, Gustav Mahler. As Alma Schindler, she studied composition with a famous pedagogue, Alexander von Zemlinsky. Although he saw a promising future for her, he also doubted whether she would have the discipline to dedicate herself entirely to the art. Part of the problem lay in the fact that he, like many of Vienna's eligible bachelors, found her irresistible and sought her hand in marriage. Since marital obligations often ended a woman's composing opportunities (such as they were), Alma Schindler had to consider her options carefully. Refusing marriage was not an option. She chose the more famous composer, who, in order to save their marriage, helped to get her songs published. This one, called *the Quiet City*, is about an anxious traveler who approaches a city at night and is comforted by the song of a child. Had Gustav Mahler been less concerned about his standing in the community and allowed his wife to pursue her craft, she might have provided the world with more great music.

Ethel Smyth, *Sonata in A minor*, op. 5, 1887

Smyth moved from London to Leipzig during her twenties to enroll in the famous conservatory there. She befriended many great musicians, including Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms. In her music, we hear echoes of Brahms's earlier E minor sonata from 1862-5, and one would be pardoned for believing that this sonata might have been a lost work by him. Smyth's use of counterpoint, her Romantic melodies, and perhaps even the tinge of nostalgia heard here and there bring to mind symphonic moments by the older master. However, this sonata has an English restraint and charm that sets it apart. Sprinkled throughout the score are low-end dynamic indications that speak, on the one hand, to the stiff upper lip of her culture; the dancelike rondo finale contains a very sensuous second theme, heard twice. These dichotomous qualities may also be found in the music of her countryman, Edward Elgar.

Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, *Lament*, 1999

Upon the death of Carnegie Hall's Executive and Artistic Director, Judith Arron, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich composed *Lament* in reaction to her passing. Ms. Zwilich told me that when she wrote this piece, originally for solo piano, her friend listened to it and mentioned that there should be a cello there. Indeed, these long lines seem to benefit from the vibrato and sustained bow sound of a cello. As we take in the phrases of this short and heart-breaking piece, we hear the many stages of grief that we cycle through in times of great pain. Despite its sadness, the piece contains many fathoms of beauty with the ringing bells in the piano and the crying voice of the cello.

Hommage a Nina Simone, arr. Dan Kaufman, 2019

Although these songs were not technically written by women, we associate them with the great pianist and singer Nina Simone. We give them to the listener as a sort of encore, in tribute to the great fugue-writing, piano playing, and expressive voice of our fellow Juilliard student. While listening, one will understand how easily the cello can mimic the sound of the human voice.

— Natasha Farny, 2022

Track List for “Women’s Voices”

1. Louise Farrenc, Sonata in B-flat Major, op. 46, I. Allegro moderato
2. Louise Farrenc, Sonata in B-flat Major, op. 46, II. Andante sostenuto
3. Louise Farrenc, Sonata in B-flat Major, op. 46, III. Finale: Allegro
4. Lera Auerbach, 24 Preludes, op. 47, no. 7. Vivace ma non troppo e poco agitato
5. Lera Auerbach, 24 Preludes, op. 47, no. 24. Vivo
6. Clara Schumann, Drei Romanzen, op. 22, no. 1. Andante molto
7. Clara Schumann, Drei Romanzen, op. 22, no. 2. Allegretto: Mit zartem Vortrag
8. Clara Schumann, Drei Romanzen, op. 22, no. 3. Leidenschaftlich schnell
9. Alma Mahler, Fünf Lieder, I. *Die stille Stadt*
10. Ethel Smyth, Sonata in A minor, op. 5, I. Allegro moderato
11. Ethel Smyth, Sonata in A minor, op. 5, II. Adagio non troppo
12. Ethel Smyth, Sonata in A minor, op. 5, III. Allegro vivace e grazioso
13. Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, *Lament*
14. Walter Donaldson, “My Baby Just Cares for Me,” *Hommage à Nina Simone*, arr. D. Kaufman
15. Willard Robison, “Don’t Smoke in Bed,” *Hommage à Nina Simone*, arr. D. Kaufman
16. Walter Donaldson, “Love me or Leave me,” *Hommage à Nina Simone*, arr. D. Kaufman