

# Madeline Schiller

Madeline Schiller, The Pianist who gave the Premiere of Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto is profiled by  
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IN an article by Robert Matthew-Walker in *Music and Musicians* (January 1985, pps. 11-12), details of the background and aborted premiere of Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto can be found. But an incorrect date is given, and not given are particulars of the premiere in New York on 12 November 1881, six months before the previously accepted premiere in Moscow by Taneyev. The first performance was given by the Philharmonic Society of New York under the direction of Theodore Thomas, played by Madeline Schiller, who is not discussed in any current reference work. Madeline Schiller was born in London about 1842 (see footnote). Her father, Henry Carl Schiller, was a German immigrant; her mother, Anna Letitia de Lacy Schiller, was a native of London. After studying with Benjamin Isaacs, a local teacher in London, Madeline took a few lessons with Julius Benedict and Charles Hallé, then went to Leipzig in 1860 to study with Ignaz Moscheles. After fifteen months under his tutelage, she made a dramatic debut with the Leipzig Gewandhaus on 23 January 1862, playing Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto, which she had prepared in one day after the directors cancelled the contract of an inept pianist.

In London, female pianists were beginning to gain prominence, and the concert stage was dominated by a small collection of premier performers including Arabella Goddard, Agnes Zimmerman and Clara Schumann. During the next eight years Madeline performed with the Music Society of London in 1863 and at the Crystal Palace in 1867 when she played Moscheles' Fourth Piano Concerto. However, most of her performances were restricted to chamber music, for which she received accolades. After a performance in May 1866, the critic Hogarth wrote "She may say, 'I rose in the morning and found myself famous.' " Following a tour of Australia in 1871-72, she married Marcus Elmer Bennett, a young merchant from Boston. On a family visit to his family in Boston in 1873, he became very ill, forcing them to remain in the U.S. He died at the age of thirty-three on 5 May 1876, leaving her with two small children.

In the United States at this time, pianists were primarily local entities. Each metropolitan region had its own collection, who played the majority of the recitals and an occasional concerto with the local orchestra or with a travelling orchestra. Among the pianists in Boston were Anna Mehlig, Benjamin Lang, Ernst Perabo, Richard Hoffman, and Sebastian



Madeline Schiller; A rare photo of this outstanding 19th century pianist.

Bach Mills. Madeline made her U.S. debut in Cambridge on 5 Dec. 1873, playing Schumann's Piano Concerto with Theodore Thomas and his orchestra. Two weeks later she made her Boston debut with the same group, playing Beethoven's Fifth Piano concerto. Immediately she became the favourite of the Boston audiences. In fact, for the next four and a half years she was the premier pianist in the U.S.

On 9 Jan. 1874, she played Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata with Wieniawski in New York. A reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote: "The playing of M. Wieniawski ... rather dwarfed the piano-part of the sonata, but Mme. Schiller had, perhaps, a finer opportunity of asserting her solid qualities as a musician than in an ordinary solo ... She is unquestionably a most-accomplished performer. She has considerable wrist power, a touch of reasonable variety, unexpected cleanness of execution, and much fluency ... As it is, after adding to this enumeration of the pianist's characteristics that her readings are absolutely correct and very scholarly in respect of rhythm we shall have said enough to warrant the regret that she

should be wedded to Boston instead of New York." Other reviews were equally flattering. On 16 Jan. they repeated this concert in Boston with great success.

After Mills suffered broken legs in a carriage accident in September 1874, Madeline was summoned at the last moment by Thomas to play Raff's Piano Concerto, which she learned in less than a week. She subsequently played this work on many occasions from Providence to Chicago. Several critics found her ability to learn a work such as the Raff in such a short period astounding. This ability to learn a new work was further demonstrated in 1881 when she prepared Saint-Saens's Fourth Piano Concerto in less than a week.

After her husband's death, Madeline immersed herself with chamber music concerts, solo recitals, orchestra performances, and teaching. By the spring of 1878, she had become so inundated that she needed a rest, so for three years, she did not perform in public.

In 1881 Madeline agreed to play the new Second Piano Concerto by Tchaikovsky with Thomas and Philharmonic Society of New York. Clearly



from Thomas's autobiography and from the program of the first performance, neither performer knew that the performance on 12 Nov. 1881, was in fact the world premiere. Thomas kept detailed records of every performance that he conducted, notating when the event was a premiere or a local first performance in America. The events leading to the unusual publication of the work before the premiere can be found in the article by Matthew-Walker.

This return to the stage by Schiller was anticipated with great enthusiasm: "The first public rehearsal of the New York Philharmonic Society takes place this afternoon. ...Mme. Madeleine (sic) Schiller, who will be remembered as a highly accomplished pianiste, will be the soloist and play a new concerto by Tchaikowski. There are few ladies of the stage who have more justly earned their position than Mme. Schiller, and her return will be a welcome event which every one of musical intelligence will be pleased to acknowledge." (*New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1881)

The concerto received few accolades, but her playing was lavishly praised: "She is one of the very few feminine pianists who are entitled to rank as artists, and makes no demands on the sympathies of her hearers by reason of the supposed physical weaknesses of her sex ... It was in the andante and the allegro con fuoco that the pianiste was particularly distinguished. It was a brilliant piece of pianism, the only regret being that her efforts had not been devoted to a more interesting work, for apart from the attraction of novelty, it cannot be said that the concerto possesses any great merit." (*New York Times*, 13 Nov. 1881) Another review was similar, though it devoted more space to the concerto: "The whole work is melodious, animated, and richly colored. Its themes are distinct, and the fertile imagination and ample technical resources of the composer are betrayed by a certain *entrain* not easy to describe but irresistible in its effect. Madame Schiller, whose return after a long absence from the country is welcome to all true lovers of art, performed the severe task which fell to her triumphantly." (*New York Tribune*, 13 Nov. 1881)

On the program for this concert the Philharmonic Society misspelled her name, Madeleine, which was also duly adopted by the newspapers. However, it is not as incongruous as the announcement before her Cambridge debut when the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported: "Madame Schiller has a great reputation as an oratorio soloist, and will sing for the first time before an American audience."

She played the same concerto for the last time on 9 February 1882, in Boston with the Harvard Music Association. Madeline rapidly regained her previously held position of prominence in the concert world of Boston and New York, frequently appearing in recitals, but rarely playing



Benno Moiseiwitsch; who made the first recording of Tchaikovsky's second piano concerto.

with orchestras. In the meantime, more female competition had become present in the forms of Julie Revé-King, Helen Hopekirk, Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, and Adele Aus der Ohe' while in Europe were heard Sophie Menter and Teresa Carréno.

In 1887 Madeline returned for a very successful tour to Australia, where she was called "the greatest pianist to have appeared in Australia". She then went to London where she played several recitals. But by this time the influence of Liszt had begun to dominate piano technique, and her classical approach was subject to unjust criticism. However, following a performance of Chopin's E-minor Concerto on 17 May 1890, in London, her playing was praised in the *London Times* as being "full of distinction and true poetic feeling".

Returning to the U.S., she moved to New York, where she suffered a serious head injury that curtailed all performances except for a series of recitals in 1899 which were well-received by her devoted following, but reviewed with great reservation by the critics. She retired after a recital in Boston on 10 April 1900.

The last years of her life were spent in New York City with her daughter. After a long illness, she died during an intense heat-wave on 3 July 1911, from uterine cancer and a cerebral hemorrhage. As is the case of many performers whose deaths occur after their concert careers have ended, the *New York Times* did not

provide an obituary, just a perfunctory notice, while the *Tribune* gave a small obituary; but even here ironically misspelled her name.

**Footnote:** Press releases listed her birth as being about 1850, which was faithfully reproduced in the three editions of *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, and the American Supplement to the third edition of *Groves' Dictionary of Music and Musicians*; but her death certificate gives her age at death as being sixty-five, which would make her birth year 1845. A search for the years 1843 through 1847 in the records of St. Catherine's House in London proved futile. Reviews of her debut and the lack of mention of "wunderkind" by Moscheles and early reviews of concerts imply that she must have been born before 1843. A review of her 1862 Leipzig debut called her "a young lady". A press release given in Australia in 1878 states that she was twelve when she began studying with Isaacs, which further supports a birthyear before 1843. Furthermore, an announcement of an impending concert in the *London Times* in 1864 implies that she was living by herself, hardly appropriate behaviour for a fourteen year old girl in London, but somewhat reasonable for a young lady of twenty-two.

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