

“Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler: Concert Pianist Battling Gender Lines in the Early 20th Century”

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Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler (1863-1927) was one of the leading solo pianists, male or female in her generation. Although born in the city of Bielitz in modern day Poland, Bloomfield came to the United States as a young child and subsequently referred to herself as an American pianist. The majority of her early biographical information was penned by her husband, Sigmund Zeisler, and has been restated in numerous studies about Bloomfield. The information, however, is highly romanticized and frequently places Bloomfield Zeisler in the role of the heroine. Although definitely an intriguing read, questions remain about the objectivity and factual basis of the document, particularly in the years before the couple met. The typewritten manuscript remains unpublished in the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, Ohio along with many correspondences between Bloomfield Zeisler and some of the most known musical personalities of the day including James Gibbons Huneker, Pablo Casals, Philip Hale and Edward MacDowell. The scope of this research, however, will focus on the pianist’s struggles to maintain a professional performing career while maintaining the image of the domestic housewife to the media and her audiences. Bloomfield Zeisler was very conscientious of her public image as a woman who enjoyed the dual life of motherhood and career and consistently appears as the

woman who can and did have it all. Her correspondences, however, suggest a somewhat less domesticated woman than this image and reveal her to be an astute businesswoman as well.

Bloomfield Zeisler, the only daughter of Bertha Jaeger and Salomon Blumenfeld, immigrated with her family to the United States, eventually settling in Chicago. She studied piano informally with her brother before progressing to studies with Bernhard Ziehn, a theorist and Carl Wolfsohn, a prominent piano teacher in that city. It was the latter who arranged her debut at his Beethoven's Society on February 25, 1875 at the age of 12. Two years later, she performed for Annette Essipoff, the virtuoso Russian pianist who encouraged her to study with her former teacher, Theodor Leschetizky. Bloomfield Zeisler shortly thereafter moved to Vienna and studied with the legend from 1879-1883. Following these years of study, her professional American debut occurred on January 11, 1884 in Chicago and nearly a year later, she performed Anton Rubinstein's *Concerto in D Minor* for her New York debut.¹

Prior to her studies in Vienna, she met her second cousin and soon to be future husband, Sigmund Zeisler, a lawyer best known as co-counsel for the defense during the Haymarket Riot anarchists' trial.² After their marriage in 1885, her husband wrote of his gradual understanding of Bloomfield Zeisler as an *artiste* with a profound calling:

There was a time when I had flattered myself with the hope that when once we were married, especially if we had a child, and when Fannie would have tasted the hardships and sacrifices of a professional career, she would give it up and be content with the life of a wife and mother. For several years I had done my utmost to persuade her in this direction. But when I discovered the truth that wherever nature plants an outstanding

¹ Diana Hallman, "Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/author/zeisler-fannie-bloomfield>.

² Hallman, *Jewish Women's Archive*.

artistic gift, it plants right next to it an intense desire for its recognition. I became convinced that Fannie's gift was quite out of the ordinary and that her ambition was a perfectly natural passion for self-expression. Having seen the light I not only ceased my opposition to her professional career, but began to further it in every way that I could, realizing that this course was an essential condition to our continued happiness.³

Indeed, her husband was a primary source of stability throughout her extensive career and he frequently forsook his own professional obligations to accompany her on numerous tours.

As noted previously, Sigmund's biographical sketch maintains a significant role in any research of Bloomfield Zeisler. From these documents, it is clear that she encountered a myriad of health obstacles through her adolescent years. Many of these diagnoses conform to illnesses that have been nearly exclusively associated with women throughout the nineteenth century. She was described as "weak, anemic and nervous"⁴ as a child and "nervous" is a term that appears frequently in many concert reviews even of her mature playing. According to this document by her husband, when the pianist initially traveled abroad for further studies, Julius Epstein, a pedagogue at the Vienna Conservatory, and Leschetizky himself expressed serious doubts about her physical strength to succeed as a pianist. The list of ailments with which Bloomfield Zeisler was diagnosed includes anemia, fatigue, and "frequent and violent headaches"⁵ among numerous others. Despite the specific illness, physicians continually insisted the cure was more rest and less piano.

³ The Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler papers housed at the American Jewish Archives contains an unpublished biography by her husband, Sigmund Zeisler in folders 23-26. Subsequent citations will be listed as: Sigmund Zeisler, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati: OH.

⁴ Sigmund Zeisler, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati: OH.

⁵Ibid.

Dietary issues appear in her husband's accounts of their early life together and at one point he proposes that the cure for her would be an "abundance of wholesome, palatable food to excite her poor appetite."⁶ When the couple traveled abroad to Europe later he mentions Bloomfield Zeisler's weight gain and in one case actually notated the precise number in pounds.⁷ Naturally, anorexia nervosa immediately springs to the contemporary mind and although the disease was termed in the 1870s, this was one malady with which she was never diagnosed. Indeed, her ability to perform such demanding works in concert suggests that such a condition would be extremely unlikely. The attention her husband devotes to her appetite remains curious and unexplained.

After giving birth to her first son, Bloomfield Zeisler returned to Europe to study again with Leschetizky in preparation of returning to the concert stage, a somewhat unusual choice for a new wife and mother during this time. The wheels of change for women, in the United States, however, were already in motion by the time her career was blossoming. By the mid-nineteenth century women suffragists in this country were adamantly taking a stand but of course, change was only gradual. Bloomfield Zeisler, an astute businesswoman, was cautious about her public image. Naturally, the music critics commented frequently on her gender, and unsurprisingly such remarks figure substantially in her reviews. Indeed, Bloomfield Zeisler could scarcely have forgotten that she was not just a pianist but a *female* pianist since nearly every review from her performances makes a great deal of this phenomenon.

Bloomfield Zeisler, of course was not the only performer to encounter gender bias. Pianist, Olga Samaroff remarked in *Music Clubs Magazine*:

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

During all the years of my career as a woman pianist at least eighty percent of my press reviews either stated that I played like a man, or alluded to my playing like a woman. When the critic said I played like a woman, it meant that he did not like me at all.⁸

Bloomfield Zeisler's reviews follow a similar pattern which may be expected with the view of women during this time. A *New York Times* review dated November 17, 1901 is typical of her critiques and as such, shall be quoted at length:

Mrs. Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, the most distinguished of American women players of the piano forte (sic), gave a recital yesterday afternoon in Mendelssohn Hall. There was a large audience, a fact which needs to be mentioned, because it is not the rule at piano recitals, and an abundance of applause, which is not at all usual where music is performed by a soloist. Let it be recorded that on this occasion the applause was almost always deserved. In this (Beethoven's Opus 111) Mrs. Zeisler's nervous organization, which is, after all is said, the substantial basis of her extraordinary fascination as a player, served her but unkindly in the first movement . . . it was piano playing of the highest order, and sustained the reputation of this artist. Mrs. Zeisler has striven hard to acquire power, in which, by reason of her physical frailness, she is naturally lacking . . . she rises to heights not passed by any other woman player now before the public.⁹

While a praiseworthy review, the critic calls attention to her gender more than once. One may be inclined to dismiss these comments as simply a product of its time but this trend continues today, most notably with the clothing of female conductors. In a review from 2008 of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, James R. Oestreich opines on Marin Alsop's attire, "And Ms. Alsop --

⁸Olga Samaroff Stokowski, "Women in Music," *Music Clubs Magazine* 17 (September-October, 1937), 7-9, 12, quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, "'Whence Comes the Lady Tympanist?' Gender and Instrumental Musicians in America, 1853-1990," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 1993): 293.

⁹"A virtuoso recital," *New York Times*, November 17, 1901, <http://www.proquest.com>.

nattily dressed in a black pantsuit, with red trim at the cuffs and under the back flap, and conducting without a score -- showed complete control, infectious enthusiasm and canny pacing.”¹⁰

Russian composer and pianist, Anton Rubinstein (1829-94) published his *Music and its Masters* in 1891 and here, explains why he believes women are less successful musicians:

Women lack two prime qualities necessary for creating—subjectivity and initiative. In practise they can not get beyond objectivity (imitation). They lack courage and conviction to rise to subjectivity. For musical creation they lack absorption, concentration, power of thought, largeness of emotional horizon, freedom in outlining, etc. It is a mystery why it should just be music, the noblest most beautiful, refined spiritual and emotional product of the human mind that is so inaccessible to woman who is a compound of all those qualities; all the more as she has done great things in the other arts, even in the sciences.¹¹

Two years later, however, after he penned this denouncement of women musicians, he heard Bloomfield Zeisler perform his own *Concerto in D minor*. He thanked her after the performance for her artistic interpretation and later wrote that this piece was never played so beautifully.¹² Whether or not this changed his thinking about women is impossible to tell of course, but regardless, this testifies to Bloomfield Zeisler’s pianistic ability.

It is interesting to note her former teacher, Leschetizky’s attitudes of his female students. In pianist’s Harold Bauer’s autobiography, he recalls an evening with the great teacher. After his

¹⁰James R. Oestreich, “Keeping a Faun, a Scamp and a Firebird in Line,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2008, pg. 4.

¹¹Anton Rubinstein, *Music and its Masters*, 2nd edition (Augener Ltd: 1896), quoted in Emmet Densmore, MD, *Sex Equality: A Solution of the Woman Problem* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Lim. 1907), 159-60.

¹²William L. Hubbard, “Letter,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 26, 1893, quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 82-83.

female students left one evening, according to Bauer, “Leschetizky looked at them and said, ‘Just think! Some fellow must be found for each one of these girls, and his sole reason for existence will be to nullify their studies and ruin their careers.’”¹³ This telling statement reveals that indeed, it was quite the standard for female graduates of his studio to enter into domesticity with little thought of performing; thus Bloomfield Zeisler is all the more remarkable. Olga Samaroff echoes this sentiment in her own autobiography, *An American Musician’s Story*:

I was brought up with the idea, that I should fit myself for a public career but only undertake if ‘if I had to.’ This meant in plain English that if no stalwart male were at hand to relieve me of the necessity of making my living, I might play in concerts and should be thoroughly prepared to do so, but there would be no question if I had the choice between matrimony and a career—I should marry.¹⁴

Bloomfield Zeisler commented on this and one can’t help but perceive bitterness in the words. The female performer:

assumes additional heavy burdens and is obliged to lead two entirely full lives—that is if she does her duty. In the case of the man who carries on a public career it makes little difference. He. . . acquires in his wife someone who surrounds him with all of the comforts of domesticity and often stands between him and the unreasonableness of the outside world.¹⁵

¹³ Harold Bauer, *Harold Bauer, His Book* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1948), 135, quoted in Christine Ammer, *Unsung: a history of women in American music*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 323.

¹⁴ Olga Samaroff Stakowski, *An American Musician’s Story* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1939), 15 quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 78-79.

¹⁵ Martin Bruhl, “Music and Musicians,” *Burlington Gazette*, August 18, 1916, quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 93

Her words clearly define the pressures of a performing female concert artist and are one of the few public declarations to be found by the pianist.

Bloomfield Zeisler continued throughout the majority of her adult life continuously straddling the lines of the domestic ideal for women and the career that was essential for her professional fulfillment. An average concert season for the pianist consisted of 50 performances per year and simultaneously, she maintained a private studio at the Bush Temple of Music. Not to be dismissed are the multitude of family and social duties that accompanied domesticity in the homes of the upper class. The Zeisler residence was known for its salons that featured such prominent guests as Richard Strauss, William Jennings Bryan and other notables from both Europe and the States that happened to be in Chicago visiting.¹⁶

Sigmund Zeisler provides an anecdote of the birth of their second son that demonstrates Bloomfield Zeisler's triple role as pianist, woman and mother. According to his writings, during labor pains, she did not exhibit any signs of distress except "when the pain was the worst she pressed a napkin against her mouth to suppress her outcries."¹⁷ Her physician who was "in the midst of a disquisition about the susceptibility of the average woman to pain during labor"¹⁸ challenged her to play a piece on the piano, which she promptly did, choosing a work by Leschetizky for the left hand alone because the right hand was occupied holding the napkin. She continued to experience contractions during this time but never ceased and played "with all the dash and bravura, the technical perfection and the fiery temperament with which she had ever

¹⁶ Diana R. Hallman, jacket notes, Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, *Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler 1863-1927*, Pierian 0003/4.

¹⁷Sigmund Zeisler, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati: OH.

¹⁸Ibid.

played it.”¹⁹ As her husband relates, the doctor considered this “the most astounding experience in his life.”²⁰

Although a force to be reckoned with on the piano, Bloomfield Zeisler was quite conscious of the image she projected and she mentions frequently her domesticity, which was highly romanticized. In the magazine, *The Banner of Gold*, William Armstrong’s article described her as “first the mother, afterward the artist.”²¹ In the same article, he depicts the correspondences between the pianist and one of her sons away at boarding school, as “so eloquent in their expression of childish loneliness that they brought tears to the eyes of strangers to whom his mother read them.”²² While tender in sentiment, the article and these letters do not portray the full picture of her parenting. On several occasions, she was planning to visit her sons but canceled because of such professional obligations as an appointment with a dressmaker, a “stunt at the Book and Play Club,”²³ or simply because she was behind on her work. Such private letters exhibit a very different side of Bloomfield Zeisler, the career-oriented woman rather than the doting maternal image explored exclusively in the media.

A similar parallel can be found in the representation of Bloomfield Zeisler as a wife. *The Detroit News*’s article with the headline “Noted Pianiste (sic) Likes to Darn Hubby’s Sox (sic)” describes her life as a newlywed and mentions specifically that she darned the socks and sewed

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹ William Armstrong, “Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler,” *The Banner of Gold*, April 17, 1897, quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 85.

²² Armstrong, 84-85.

²³ Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 93.

the buttons on her husband's clothing "just as carefully as if I could not play a note."²⁴ This phrasing implies that she was concerned that her professional career not infringe upon her duties as a wife and therefore was able to maintain society's image of an ideal woman. Likewise, an article in the March 21, 1900 *Musical Courier* suggested that an answer could be found to the "woman problem" by observing Bloomfield Zeisler who "combines modest with genius and tranquil domesticity with fame. . . The home life of the pianist is as ideal as her public career is great."²⁵ The pianist herself commented on the "woman problem" in the February 18th, 1899 edition of *Musical America* when she told John C. Freund, "I am proud to have solved that great problem for so many women. I did not give up my art when I married, nor have I neglected my home."²⁶

This public, domestic side she portrayed contrasted quite differently from the concertizing and professional woman she also was. In the private letters available from the American Jewish Archives, one learns a great deal more about Bloomfield Zeisler than the contemporary articles suggest. Bloomfield Zeisler's perspicacity in management is not as well known but again, is documented through numerous correspondences, particularly letters from Steinway & Sons. From December 22, 1903, the company wrote:

My dear Mrs. Zeisler:

Your kindness in consenting to play at the 'White House' on January 22nd was highly appreciated by us, and we immediately notified Mr. Loeb, Secretary to the President

²⁴ "Noted pianist likes to Darn Hubby's Sox," *Detroit News*, undated clipping, quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 85-86.

²⁵ "Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler's Silver Anniversary," *Musical Courier*, March 21, 1900, 19-20 quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 86.

²⁶ John C. Freund, *Musical America*, February 18, 1899 quoted in Sigmund Zeisler, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati: OH.

(Theodore Roosevelt), of your kind offer. I failed to explain to you that these musicales are purely social affairs and . . . for that reason Mrs. Roosevelt has requested that we have a vocalist also for that evening, probably someone in the social circle, to sing one or two selections. You stated you would prefer to have the entire evening to yourself, and of course we quite agree with you, but I hardly see how we can ignore Mrs. Roosevelt's request now . . . Of course, you will have the most important part of the musical. Whether the vocalist will be a lady or a gentleman I have not yet learned, probably some friend of the Presidential family, but I felt it my duty to notify you of this at once and trust, under the circumstance, you will acquiesce as previously (sic) arranged.²⁷

A subsequent letter from Steinway & Sons dated January 7, 1904 reads:

When . . . in Washington I had a long talk with reference to your playing on January 22nd and occupying the entire programme. Mrs. Roosevelt does not feel that she can conveniently consent to this, as she would like to have another on the programme with you.²⁸

Although no extant letters by Bloomfield Zeisler are in existence on this topic, it is clear that the pianist was quite adamant regarding her role as an artist rather than simply an entertainer to accompany an amateur singer from the President's social circle and refused to perform under those circumstances. Curiously, Ferruccio Busoni performed at the White House in that January on a completely solo program. Bloomfield Zeisler did eventually perform at the White House in collaboration but not with an amateur singer from the President's social circle but rather with the

²⁷Steinway & Sons to Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, December 22, 1903 from the unpublished *Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler Papers* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives).

²⁸Steinway & Sons to Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, January 7, 1904, (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives).

internationally acclaimed violinist Fritz Kreisler on an April 15, 1910 Lenten Musicale Concert under the William Howard Taft administration.²⁹

It is certainly interesting to note the pianist's own feelings about gender and music during her career. In 1890, Bloomfield Zeisler spoke on the differences between "reproductive" artists (performers) and "creative" artists (composers) at the Music Teachers National Association in Detroit. As a well-known pianist herself, she explained that women performers had more or less been accepted but in the field of composition, more time was necessary for women to fully develop; she emphasized that the fundamental stumbling block for women composers was the lack of opportunity rather than the lack of ability³⁰ and the more recent freedom they acquired would enable women to explore this field more thoroughly. She predicted in time, women would become entirely developed as composers and eventually would produce great works of art.³¹

Bloomfield Zeisler programmed works by female composers on her recitals including pieces by Amy Cheney Beach and Cecile Chaminade both of whom dedicated pieces to her. Including lesser known works on recitals was somewhat of a risk and she addressed this concern by saying, "People are apt to look askance if they see pieces by women on a program. I say. . . if such things are never played, if artists will never bring them forward, they will always remain

²⁹ Elise K. Kirk, *Music at the White House* (Urbana, IL: University of IL, 1986), 175-176, 188.

³⁰ Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, "Woman in Music," *Music Teachers National Association: Official Report of Annual Meeting*, 1890, 38-44 quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 92.

³¹ Christine Ammer, *Unsung: a history of women in American music*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 74

unknown. Yet these composers have their place and value.”³² (Play Chaminade *Le Retour* 3.24 this was dedicated to Madame Bloomfield Zeisler by composer)

Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler was not the average turn of the century woman. Despite what society expected or even demanded of women, she carefully crafted her career to appear as a model wife and mother in the media while simultaneously working behind the scenes and on the stage to manage her own professional career. In essence, she created her own solution to the “woman problem.” Her statement in the *American Art Journal*, discussing the future of women composers also aptly summarizes her own life, “May it then be said . . . She came, was heard, and conquered.”³³

³²Harriet Brower, “Pianist’s Mind Delicately Adjusted During Recital,” *Musical America* 40 December 18, 1915, 40 quoted in Beth Abelson Macleod, *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001), 92-93.

³³Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, “Women in Music,” *American Art Journal* 58, 1 (October 17, 1891): 1-3 quoted in Christine Ammer, *Unsung: a history of women in American music*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 74.

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