

DORIS DAVIS

Texas A&M University - Texarkana

## The Enigma at the Keyboard: Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz

OF THE INTELLECTUAL WOMEN DEPICTED IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY American literature, one of the most enigmatic is Kate Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz, the virtuosic pianist in *The Awakening*. Alternately seen as an "artistic role model," a "pseudo-mother figure," a "lesbian" prototype, a "surrogate lover," a "conjurer," or even a "witch," she remains for most readers a protean figure of intrigue.<sup>1</sup> Secluded in her ever-changing garrets, she attests to the likely socially-imposed isolation of any nineteenth-century woman who dared challenge the acceptable pattern for female achievement. That her talent is in music is not happenstance. Emily Toth, Chopin's most recent biographer, has documented Chopin's own interest in music—particularly in the piano. Under the guidance of her great-grandmother Madame Charleville, she began lessons at age five or six, studying at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in St. Louis and later briefly at the Visitation Academy, and continued her studies throughout her formative years. Her closest girlhood friend, Kitty Garesché, described her interest in music (and reading) as "veritable passions," and she continued to perform on the piano as an adult for family and friends in the privacy of her "salon." Toth assures us that she was no "dilettante" (35-41, 72). Given her interest in music, it is hardly surprising that her first publication was a piece of music, the "Lilia Polka," published in 1888 and named in honor of her only daughter, Lélia (144),<sup>2</sup> or that her first published story—"Wiser than a God"—depicts a heroine who declines marriage to

---

<sup>1</sup>For examples of "artistic role model" and "pseudo-mother figure" see Seidel, "Picture Perfect," 231 and 234; "lesbian" see Seidel, "Art is an Unnatural Act," 200; "surrogate lover," see Griffith 148 and Showalter 46; "conjurer" and "witch" see Giorcelli 136-37.

<sup>2</sup>For the musical score of "Lilia Polka," see *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*. Ed. Emily Toth, Per Seyersted, and Cheyenne Bonnell. 195-99. In an unpublished article, "Musical Images in the Writings of Kate Chopin," Dr. George Keck, Professor of Music at Ouachita Baptist University, evaluates "Lilia Polka" as "pianistic throughout," making "greater technical and musical demands on the performer than many other such examples turned out by the thousands during this decade." I am grateful to Professor Keck for allowing me to read and quote from his essay.

pursue a successful career as a concert pianist with “extended and remunerative concert tour[s]” (47).<sup>3</sup>

However believable her fictitious character may be, though, Chopin knew well that her heroine, Paula, was an anomaly in real life. There were, in fact, few successful nineteenth-century women concert pianists.<sup>4</sup> Those that did exist were typically perceived by society as suspiciously “masculine” or in some other way peculiar. This nineteenth-century conceptualization of the female concert pianist as “unnatural”<sup>5</sup> may offer insight into the complexity of Chopin’s character Mlle. Reisz. Although she does not support herself through concertizing, her evening performances at Grand Isle leave little doubt that she has the artistry essential for such a career. This paper examines Chopin’s characterization of Mlle. Reisz against the background of nineteenth-century conceptualizations of female concert pianists. It argues that Mlle. Reisz embodies these perceptions and that she reflects Chopin’s own sense of aesthetics.

It is important to realize that serious music—whether in performance or composition—was viewed by most in the nineteenth century as the domain of the male. Granted, women did learn music as one of the social graces and the piano was, in fact, as pointed out by Carol Neuls-Bates, considered to be an instrument especially suitable for the female (xiii). It required no contortion of facial muscles nor awkward physical movements. Moreover, the instrument found its place as a common

---

<sup>3</sup>This and all further references to Chopin’s works are to *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*.

<sup>4</sup>Olga Samaroff, a leading American concert pianist in her day, serves as an excellent example of the difficulties for women in establishing careers. Born in 1882 in San Antonio, Texas, she had studied in Europe, but when she returned to the United States in 1904, the leading New York manager of the time refused to handle a concert engagement. Following his suggestion, she risked all the money she had; she hired the New York Symphony Orchestra in 1905, rented Carnegie Hall, and performed two concertos. Perhaps to commemorate her own struggle as well as those of other women artists, Samaroff includes in her autobiography a story of three wandering musicians in medieval Europe, two men and one woman. In the winter when they are unable to travel, the men retreat to a monastery to copy manuscripts for their livelihood, while the woman has “to earn her living as a prostitute” (Ammer 62-65).

<sup>5</sup>Seidel uses this term in “Art is an Unnatural Act”; she focuses mainly on what she believes to be lesbian aspects of Mlle. Reisz’s characterization.

adornment in the drawing room, ready for women to entertain themselves and guests. Writing in 1904, music journalist James Huneker describes the passing of this type of musician, whom he calls the “piano girl” (qtd. in Tick 325), one always ready to appease others, much like Chopin’s character Adèle Ratignolle in *The Awakening*, who performs solely for her family’s entertainment and considers the piano “a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (904). Music, for Adèle, is a kind of “domestic decoration,” as Kathryn Seidel aptly notes (“Picture Perfect” 230).

This “piano girl” appears in much nineteenth-century literature. Examining the work of Jane Austen, for example, we see her various heroines learning the instrument. Emma regrets that she hasn’t become more skillful at the keyboard, whereas Anne in *Persuasion* and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* show proficiency. The character who seems to exhibit potential for real artistry—Jane Fairfax in *Emma*—is notably enigmatic throughout much of the novel. Isolated by the circumstances of birth and romantic intrigue, she is intelligent, yet perhaps flawed by her attachment to the questionable Frank Churchill. Significantly, Austen’s character that displays exceptional musical talent is seen throughout much of the book as having questionable judgment.

If we turn to the real world of female pianists, Clara Schumann, the most important female pianist of the mid-nineteenth century, was viewed by George Bernard Shaw as “nobly beautiful and poetic,” yet an aura of mystery surrounded her: the early rigidity of her father, the difficulty of performing with eight children, the mental breakdown and eventual death of Robert, her famous composer husband, and the adoration of her close friend Brahms. To the end of her career, she played “every concert dressed in black, bent over, head almost touching the keys” in her husband’s memory (Schonberg 223-229). One critic describes her as “a great artist with masculine energy and feminine instincts,” but he adds, “one could hardly call her a graceful or sympathetic woman” (Reich 263). Other pianists of the period include Sophie Menter, described as “electrifying” and “*l’incarnation de Liszt*” (Schonberg 246), Annette Essipoff, who performed pieces of “satanic difficulty” (332), and the “cyclonic” Teresa Carreño, who was beautiful in an “Amazonian sort of way” (328) and “played like a man” (331). The Budapest newspapers labeled her the “female Rubinstein” (Ammer 48).

The most prominent American pianist of the last part of the nineteenth century was Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, a pianist whom Chopin may well have heard play. She performed with “full, hunched shoulders” and a “sinewy body” (a Mlle. Reisz?). In 1901 the *New York Sun* called her “an electric dynamo endowed with a human body and soul” (Schonberg 334-35). Earlier in 1887, critic James Huneker had written: “Here was something rare in pianism, particularly from a woman. Breadth, color, fire . . . and an intensity of attack that was positively *enthusing* . . .” He adds, “The vehemence of [her] attack” is “like a stealthy panther laying in wait for its prey. . .” (qtd. in Ammer 56).

These descriptions attest to the nineteenth-century view that a woman who played the piano with great power and emotion was an oddity, beyond the confines of traditional female achievement or definition. Accustomed to “flamboyant” male pianists like Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and Ignace Paderewski, who began touring North America in the middle of the nineteenth century, American audiences viewed technical prowess as the province of the male. For most, “the mere idea of a ‘woman virtuoso’ was a ludicrous contradiction in terms” (Macleod 4). Some women artists, in fact, succumbed to public scrutiny of their femininity by emphasizing domestic interests. Much like Chopin herself, who presented a public image as one who wrote effortlessly at home amidst domestic concerns (Walker 111), Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler, for instance, publicly touted her roles of wife, mother, and artist, as evidenced in a contemporary newspaper story entitled: “Noted Pianiste (sic) Likes to Darn Hubby’s Sox” (Macleod 85).

Nineteenth-century society clearly prescribed rigid decorum for female pianists. The following excerpt from *Harper’s Magazine*, 1851, addressed to young women readers, shows the typical attitude:

Sit in a simple, graceful, unconstrained posture. Never turn up the eyes or swing about the body; the expression you mean to give will never be understood by those foolish motions. . . . However loud you wish to be, never thump. . . . Aim more at pleasing than at astonishing. . . . Never bore people with ugly music merely because it is the work of some famous composer, and do not let the pieces you perform . . . be too long. (qtd. in Ammer 43)

Moreover, societal views had changed little by the end of the century, as Beth Macleod points out: “The traditional modesty and restraint expected of a woman performing in the parlor was the antithesis of the

physical freedom and appearance of emotional abandon required of the virtuoso performing Romantic music in the concert hall.”<sup>6</sup> She adds that even through the early twentieth century, audiences were more receptive toward passionate playing and technical prowess from a female child prodigy than from an adult woman (22-27).

To what extent Chopin may have heard women or men perform professionally is undocumented. Certainly opportunities existed for her to hear acclaimed artists in St. Louis, which enjoyed various German bands, philharmonic societies, and formal concerts. Chopin does record in her commonplace book seeing the brilliant Norwegian violinist Ole Bull perform in St. Louis in 1868 (Toth 86). Similarly, she describes attending several musical events on her honeymoon in 1870. During their two-week stay in New York, she heard Theo. Thomas’s Orchestra several times, which was her “chief pleasure” in that city; in Lucerne, Switzerland, she notes hearing the “great organ play” in the cathedral as well as enjoying “what is considered, the finest organ in the world” in the Fribourg cathedral (Toth, 103, 114-115). Her residency in New Orleans from mid-1870 to mid-1879 would have permitted musical activities at the St. Charles Theatre, the Academy of Music and the French Opera House (the first in the nation to offer performances of *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*) but, as Toth notes, there is no record of her activities (126). Certainly, her return to St. Louis in 1884 and her trips to New York and Boston in 1893 and to Chicago in 1893 and 1898 would have allowed her attendance at concerts. Several highly regarded female concert pianists performed in St. Louis during the period, Julie Rivé-King, for example, in 1883, and Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler in February of 1898 (Macleod 30, 86). In addition, as an avid reader and one versed in the affairs of her day, Chopin no doubt knew contemporary newspaper accounts of women concert pianists.

As an astute observer of society, Chopin would also have understood that the world of serious music was male-centered and male-dominated and that most women had been, in fact, discouraged from pursuing music seriously. Famous early nineteenth-century examples include Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, whose “musical gifts were quite as

---

<sup>6</sup>Macleod explains that a pianist performing works from the Baroque and Classical periods could appear restrained, whereas the Romantic music of Chopin or Liszt usually demanded more physical movement and emotionalism in performance.

prodigious” as those of her famous brother Felix, although she was discouraged by both her father and brother. In 1820 her father wrote her: “Music will perhaps become his [Felix’s] profession, whilst for you it can and must only be an ornament. . .” (qtd. in Neuls-Bates 143-144). Similarly, Cosima Wagner, the wife of the famous composer, was a “fine pianist in her youth.” Her mother believed she should pursue a professional career, but her famous pianist-composer father—Franz Liszt—objected (Neuls-Bates 175). In America it was not until the 1880s that attitudes began to change about the appropriateness of serious piano study for women. Largely through the educational gains made by women generally and the success of female concert pianists, the long-held opinion that women should pursue music only as a social accomplishment began to change (Neuls-Bates 179).

Yet even as late as 1930, when American pianist Rosalyn Tureck performed the Brahms B-flat Concerto and Beethoven’s Emperor Concerto, many still considered these pieces to be “men’s work.” Playing in a “shapeless black dress,” Tureck tried to avoid distracting the audience with her appearance. As Christine Ammer explains, “Feminine sentiment was allegedly admired, but the greatest compliment was to tell a woman that she played like a man. On the other hand, masculine women were also suspect. On the whole, it was simply preferable to *be* a man” (67). By the end of the century when Chopin’s Mlle. Reisz dazzles her audience at Grand Isle, women pianists were no longer a “novelty,” but few were influential, either in performance or teaching (Ammer 62).

While Mlle. Reisz is both a performer and teacher, Chopin implies that she is a composer as well. In the scene in which she plays for Edna while the latter reads Robert’s letter, Chopin describes her as an artist synthesizing her own musical creation out of the fragments of others. Mlle. Reisz’s improvisational skill is noteworthy, for women “were encouraged to perform and not to create” (Macleod 22). Chopin writes:

Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. She sat low at the instrument, and the lines of her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity. Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu.

Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended. She sat in the sofa corner reading Robert’s letter by the fading light. Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde’s song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing.

The shadows deepened in the little room. The music grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty. The shadows grew deeper. The music filled the room. It floated out upon the night, over the housetops, the crescent of the river, losing itself in the silence of the upper air. (946)

Surely the passage was written, at least in part, out of Chopin's defiance of the typical view that women lacked creative power. It challenges the opinion, for example, of *Chicago Tribune* critic George Upton, whose book *Women in Music* was highly regarded in the 1880s and '90s. He maintained that women could not create music because they could not think logically or abstractly: "Every technical detail of music is characterized by science in its most rigid forms. In this direction woman, except in rare instances, has never achieved great results" (qtd. in Tick 334). In other words, music was masculine in conception, or as a reviewer in the *Atlantic Monthly* stated, music was a "masculine idea." And while women did not have the intellect to create, neither did they, according to this same reviewer, have the emotional depth: "Woman as the lesser man is comparatively deficient in active emotional force. . . . Much of what passes in women for true emotion is mere nervous excitability" (qtd. in Tick 334).

George Upton's pejorative opinion was frequently repeated. "Why shouldn't I state openly," wrote critic August Bungert in 1876, "that I always feel mistrust when I pick up a work bearing the name of a woman?" Critic Otto Schamm observed that "in general, one cannot trust all that much the productive capacity of women in the area of music." Another critic maintained it was impossible to evaluate Clara Wieck Schumann's Piano Concerto in A Minor "since we are dealing here with the work of a woman" (qtd. in Olson 290). Perhaps John Ruskin best summed up the attitude of most in his proclamation that a woman's intellectual capacity, unlike a man's, "was not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. . . . Her great function is to praise" (qtd. in Neuls-Bates 217).

To address the fact that women were, nevertheless, creating music, critics devised a "system of sexual aesthetics" that evaluated music in terms of its supposed feminine and masculine qualities. Feminine music—what women might hope to strive for—was by this definition "graceful," "delicate," melodic, and composed in small pieces for voice or piano. Masculine music, on the other hand, was "powerful," "intellectually rigorous in harmony, counterpoint, and other structural

logic,” and generally took the form of “large-scaled” symphonic works (Neuls-Bates 223). Even the most successful woman composer of the period—Amy Beach—found herself assessed in these terms. About her “Gaelic” Symphony—a reviewer wrote in 1896—“Occasionally she is noisy rather than sonorous. . . . A woman who writes for orchestra thinks, ‘I must be virile at any cost’” (qtd. in Neuls-Bates 224).

This, then, is the background against which Chopin created her musical virtuoso in *The Awakening*. Clearly, Mlle. Reisz has no mindset to “praise” men as Ruskin suggested. She knows she is an artist and accepts the inevitable consequences. As she tells Edna, “To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—which have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul. . . . The soul that dares and defies” (946).

If we examine the music Reisz plays, much of it defies the nineteenth-century view of how and what women *should* play. The first time Reisz performs, she “struck upon the piano,” opening with chords that “sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier’s spinal column” (906). Here is no performer of a “dainty” or “graceful” style. We are told she ended the performance with a Chopin Prelude, a kind of piece which is short but technically brilliant, like “small shooting stars” (Hutcheson and Ganz 234). Of importance is how her audience responds: “What passion!” “What an artist!” . . . “That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a man!” (907). “She plays like a man,” one can almost hear, filtering among the voices. In the later scene, Reisz plays a Chopin Impromptu, perhaps the “Fantaisie-Impromptu,” a popular concert piece filled with “bravura” (Hutcheson and Ganz 247). The “impromptu” form seems especially suited to Reisz, as it mirrors the restless energy we see in her own manner. While some of Chopin’s music, along with Mendelssohn’s, was considered appropriate for women to perform and emulate in composition (Tick 337), pieces requiring technical prowess such as a Chopin Impromptu were questionable. Reisz also plays in this same scene a transcription (most likely by Liszt) from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. On other occasions, no doubt, she performs Beethoven, as she keeps a bust of him on her mantelpiece. These details are important, for contemporary critics categorized Beethoven and Wagner as producing “virile” or “man-tones,” in “powerful” forms (Tick 337). Their music was



beyond the realm of what women should perform or emulate in composition.

Readers generally note Mlle. Reisz's drab appearance. Chopin's narrator calls her a "homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed" (905). "Her laugh consist[s] of a contortion of the face and all the muscles of the body" (944). When she plays, "her body settle[s] into ungraceful curves and angles that [give] it an appearance of deformity" (946). One can see why some critics have focused on her witch-like qualities and her lack of femininity. Yet many of these same adjectives were used by reviewers to describe the greatest of women performers. One thinks of Turek, who disguised her sexuality (even in the twentieth century!), of Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler with her "full, hunched shoulders" and "sinewy body," of her "vehemence of attack." Like Mlle. Reisz, she was of slight build and suffered curvature of the spine (Macleod 74). While Chopin may be using Reisz's physical oddities for varied purposes, her descriptions seem informed, at least in part, by the nineteenth-century conception of women concert pianists as somehow unnatural.

Readers notice as well Mlle. Reisz's irritability. She dislikes the food at Grand Isle, eating chocolates instead. "They saved her from starvation," she says, "as Madame Lebrun's table was utterly impossible" (930). Similarly, she dislikes the water and swimming, and people generally seem to annoy her. The feeling is mutual, as Edna finds out in her search for Reisz's new lodgings. The grocer with whom Mlle. had done business terms her the "most disagreeable and unpopular woman who ever lived in Bienville Street" (941). Yet Joyce Dyer appears correct in her analysis that Mlle. Reisz "has become quarrelsome, wizened, and disagreeable through the effort of maintaining her independence and assertiveness" (95). Living alone without economic or emotional support from others has hardened her sensibilities, especially toward those whose understanding she believes beneath hers. Her dislike of the Farival twins attests more to her artistry than to her disagreeableness. They represent mediocrity. Her "disagreeable" comments about the "symphony concerts" in New Orleans (971) may reflect the likelihood of all-male members.<sup>7</sup> No doubt, she is disdainful as well of the small amount she makes teaching. American pianist Amy Fay, who combined

---

<sup>7</sup>Tick notes that by 1900 there were a few all-women orchestras, but women found it difficult to find employment in orchestras led by men (326-27).

concertizing and a teaching career, noted in 1902 the difficult life of any woman who teaches privately: "It is a precarious means of support, and I often wonder what becomes of the old music teachers. One never sees them. The elderly teachers must be shelved, and how in the world do they save enough to live on?" (qtd. in Neuls-Bates 186). Mlle. Reisz has no material possessions of worth except her "magnificent piano" (944). It testifies to the sacrifices she has made, both materially and emotionally, to pursue the solitary life of an artist.

Mlle. Reisz is drawn to Edna for a number of reasons. Like the other characters in the novel, she admires Edna's physical qualities, her handsome face, her youthful physique. She enjoys her engaging manner. But more importantly, she realizes that Edna is different from the others at Grand Isle that summer. It is not just that Edna is "not one of us . . . not like us," as Madame Ratignolle tells Robert—i.e., not a Creole (900). Mlle. Reisz senses that Edna is more serious and more reflective than the others. In Chopin's first description of her, we are told that she has a way of staring at an object "as if lost in some inward maze of contemplation or thought" (883). It is this quality of introspection—heightened by Edna's various "awakenings" that summer—that attracts the pianist.

It is ironic that Mlle. Reisz often leaves Edna with a "disagreeable impression" (940), for she and the pianist are very much alike. Part of Edna's growing awareness that summer is the fact that she sees, or wishes to see, herself in the older woman. Aside from obvious differences in physical appearance and social standing, the two are quite similar. Both are perceptive about people. For example, Mlle. Reisz knows that Victor, the younger son, is Madame Lebrun's favorite, as she tells Edna. She alone understands the extent of Robert's passion for Edna (which she would have known even without his letters), and she perceives Edna's real motives in leaving Mr. Pontellier's house. In her turn, Edna knows that her husband's understanding is beneath hers, though she admits that in many ways he is the "best husband in the world" (887). She recognizes Arobin's superficiality, her father's vanity, and Dr. Mandelet's wisdom.

Both Edna and the pianist are also given to bluntness. "I don't know whether I like you or not" (945), Edna tells her on her first visit in the city. Similarly, both show contempt for superficiality and hypocrisy. Mlle. Reisz criticizes those "women in society," who make promises

“without meaning it” (944). At her final dinner, Edna seems to weary of the mindless chatter of her guests. The dinner “was stupid,” she complains to Arobin (976). To be sure, neither woman wants to be bothered with people or events potentially annoying. Mlle. Reisz refuses to play for Edna’s father during his visit (951), and when Adèle suggests that Reisz stay with Edna in the “pigeon” house, Edna acknowledges “she wouldn’t wish to come” (979). Edna herself doesn’t want to be bothered by social restraints, familial responsibilities, or public opinion. As she tells Dr. Mandelet, “I don’t want anything but my own way” (996).

Of course Edna and Mlle. Reisz are similar in their responses to the aesthetics of art. Whereas the pianist is already an artist, Edna has the potential to become one. Edna readily imagines herself as the pianist’s protégée. “I am becoming an artist,” Edna confides (946), realizing that the pianist has opened a door for her to a spiritual world beyond the mundane world of obligations. As Melanie Dawson insightfully notes, Edna begins to imitate Mlle. Reisz to seek “spiritual elevation” (95). While they already share many inward attributes, Edna works to fashion her outward life to that of Mlle. Reisz’s as well. Initially she begins to work on her paintings in an attic room, similar to Reisz’s high-perched flat. Then she strips herself of husband and children and moves into the tiny pigeon house. She begins to cultivate a disdain for materialism, admitting to herself a genuine satisfaction with the pianist’s “shabby, unpretentious little room” (980). She even seats herself at the artist’s piano, attempting to play a few measures from music that belongs to the pianist. Edna assumes the physical position of a student to her absent teacher.

Chopin uses the pianist for several purposes in addition to being an artistic role model for Edna. While Mlle. Reisz appears in only five chapters—IX, XVI, XXI, XXVI, and XXX—her artistry and ideas permeate the entire text. In her first appearance in the novel Mlle. Reisz functions to elicit Edna’s final awakening—her realization of the extraordinary beauty and power of music and, by extension, of all art. Listening to the pianist play at Grand Isle, Edna is profoundly moved. Chopin’s narrator tells the reader that Edna had heard artists at the piano before, but this was perhaps the “first time she was ready” (906). When Mlle. Reisz sees Edna moved to tears, she pats her on the shoulder as one would a fledgling. “You are the only one worth playing for,” she replies. Joyce

Dyer accurately calls the pianist the “center of beauty” and “wisdom” in the novel (95).

When Mlle. Reisz appears in chapter XVI she functions to console Edna, who is grieving over the loss of Robert. “Do you miss your friend greatly?” (927), the pianist asks, although of course she already knows the answer. She talks to her also about music and gives Edna her address in the city. She becomes Edna’s lifeline, not just the one who fosters the fascination Edna and Robert possess for each other, but the one to whom Edna turns for inspiration. When Edna decides to visit her in New Orleans in chapter XX, she goes “above all, to listen while she played upon the piano” (940). It is in this scene that Edna acknowledges to Mlle. Reisz she is becoming an artist. In her response to Edna, she makes manifest what an artist must have: talent and a courageous temperament. With the power of the artist, Mlle. Reisz plays her “magnificent” piano, coaxing the tones to grow “strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (946).

The last two chapters in which the pianist appears function in part as foreshadowing. In chapter XXVI, Edna confesses her love for Robert to the pianist, and Mlle. Reisz replies: “If I were young and in love with a man . . . he would have to be some *grand esprit*; a man with lofty aims and ability to reach them; one who stood high enough to attract the notice of his fellow-men. . . . I should never deem a man of ordinary caliber worthy of my devotion” (964).<sup>8</sup> She says this despite her high regard for Robert. As the novel concludes, the reader realizes how ordinary Robert truly is in his limited understanding of Edna and life. “Good-by—” he writes her, “because I love you” (997). The final scene in which Mlle. Reisz appears is Edna’s farewell dinner. Here again, her role in the scene is ominous, for her parting words to Edna are “*soyez sage*” (973). She alone in the novel is in a position to realize how difficult Edna’s choices may prove.

Each of Reisz’s appearances in the novel follows Edna’s emotional upheavals. The first occurs after Edna’s tumultuous awakening as a human being. The second follows Robert’s abrupt departure for Mexico. The third takes place in the midst of Edna’s struggle to create. The fourth

---

<sup>8</sup>Interestingly, Toth points out that an identical position was espoused by Harriet Monroe, founder of *Poetry* magazine. Monroe “wanted only a perfect lover, a ‘*grand esprit*,’ and so never married.” Her sister Lucy Monroe wrote the first review of *The Awakening* (328-29).

occurs after Arobin has invaded her life, and the final scene acknowledges the turmoil of Edna's departure from the "charming house on Esplandade Street" and her subsequent struggle for artistic integrity and ultimately for her life. Elaine Showalter has argued that the structure of the novel mirrors that of the impromptu—a musical form that seems spontaneous but is actually tightly organized (47). I would argue as well that the five scenes involving Mlle. Reisz offer, in musical terms, a tangible, if brief, resolution to the building tonal dissonance created collectively by Edna's series of emotional struggles.

That Edna does not succeed creates the ultimate dissonance and final conundrum in the novel. Her death has prompted an array of interpretations based on varied psychological, mythical and feminist critical perspectives. As the concluding chapter reveals, Edna swims out into the gulf preoccupied with myriad thoughts: her disappointment in Robert, her denial of her children's needs, and her failure as an artist. She imagines Mlle. Reisz sneering at her, ridiculing her artistic "pretensions." In actuality, of course, Edna projects her own artistic disappointments on this resurrected image of the pianist. In the final seconds of her life Edna mistakenly and tragically views the older woman as disdainful, as one who would fail to understand her plight. Edna fails to realize that just as Doctor Mandelet might "have understood if she had seen him" (1000), Mlle. Reisz might have offered succor to a fledging artist.

Certainly Edna has made progress in her art, as Kathryn Seidel convincingly argues ("Picture Perfect" 233). Her pigeon house provides the privacy and time to focus her energies on her painting. She begins to work more consistently and the results are convincing, as Laidpore, the art dealer who judges her painting to have grown "in force and individuality" (963), affirms. As she explains to Mlle. Reisz, her sale of her artwork will permit her economic independence—however modest. Edna is clearly proud of herself, fascinated with her own expectations. She envisions the possibility of artistic success, albeit tentatively—a "caprice" she frames it—but nonetheless a chance for artistic growth. As in Dickinson's "I dwell in Possibility," her hands are spread wide "To gather Paradise" (466).

The novel's concluding scene offers the repetition of tropes from earlier chapters: Edna standing naked on the shore of Grand Isle in a kind of new-world paradise and a "bird with a broken wing . . . beating

the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (999). This concluding imagery is a transfiguration of the images that Edna had envisioned on Grand Isle as she listened to Adèle Ratignolle play. Edna had renamed a piece of music "Solitude," and had imagined "the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him" (906). In this final passage, Edna is, of course, both the "naked man" and the wounded bird. Her wings have not been the wings that Mlle. Reisz advocated, strong enough to "soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice" (966).

Edna's transfiguration of images mirrors her psychic confusion. She has lost her vision of possibilities, succumbing to doubts of self-worth. While Mlle. Reisz had inspired her to create beauty, she had not been able to help her sustain the strength needed in so doing. Chopin's narrator acknowledges at the novel's end, "Exhaustion was pressing upon and overpowering her" (1000). I would argue that this phrase is applicable to more than just her struggle in the water, for she also lacked the fortitude to sustain her re-creation of her new self in the integrity of her work. As Wendy Martin points out, "Ambition, striving, overcoming odds, the focusing of energy on a goal are habits of mind associated with masculine mastery. A woman who wants to develop these skills has to defy a centuries-old tradition of passive femininity" (22). Mlle. Reisz had been able to internalize such discipline but at a tremendous cost—her own isolation. Her protégée could not.

Nonetheless, Edna's aborted attempt opens the door to the world of female possibilities—possibilities that were becoming realities in turn-of-the-century America. Chopin herself was one such success story, patiently refining her work, gaining in artistry. All one must do to realize her miraculous growth is to compare *The Awakening* with her first published story, "Wiser than a God," separated in composition by a decade or so. In both she envisions wisdom as being central to seeing one's way, to developing the artistic life. Mlle. Reisz tells Edna "*soyez sage*," while the short story is prefaced with a Latin proverb: "To love and be wise is scarcely granted even to a god" (39). The implication seems to be that the story's heroine Paula, although she loves the man who offers marriage, is wise in her choice of a concert career. But the narratives differ remarkably in both style and realization of theme.

Stylistically, *The Awakening* reveals an artist mature in her use of words and confident in her choices. Thematically, the novel, unlike the story, acknowledges the difficulties of a woman's rising to the height of her artistry in the male-dominated artistic world of the nineteenth century. Informed by her own struggles to create, Chopin realized firsthand the pitfalls. Her subsequent heroine Edna, who would also strive to define art over domesticity as the center of her life, is not successful.

But Chopin had what Edna did not—a “matrilineage” of strong women figures—perhaps the strongest being that of her great-grandmother Madame Charleville, who ensured that Chopin's childhood studies included both piano and books. Emily Toth suggests that Madame Charleville provided Chopin, in fact, with “her first great awakening”—and that Chopin revealed her indebtedness to her by “always [writing] affectionately about the wit and wisdom and fighting spirit of old women” (40). Chopin endows her pianist in *The Awakening* with this same wisdom and spunk and, despite Mlle. Reisz's outward irritability, Chopin develops her in a sympathetic manner. Mlle. Reisz voices Chopin's own attitudes toward art and makes manifest what Chopin saw evidenced in her society: the extraordinary difficulties for women who attempted to transcend cultural limitations.

#### Works Cited

- Ammer, Christine. *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood P, 1980.
- Bowers, Jane, and Judith Tick, eds. *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Complete Works of Kate Chopin*. Ed. Per Seyersted. Baton Rouge: LSU P, 1969.
- Dawson, Melanie. “Edna and the Tradition of Listening: The Role of Romantic Music in *The Awakening*.” *Southern Studies* 3.2 (1992): 87-98.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998.
- Dyer, Joyce. *The Awakening: A Novel of Beginnings*. New York: Twayne, 1993.

- Giorcelli, Christina. "Edna's Wisdom: A Transitional and Numinous Merging." Martin, *New Essays* 109-48.
- Griffith, Kelly. "Wagnerian Romanticism in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." *English Romanticism: Preludes and Postludes*. Ed. Donald Schoonmaker and John A. Alford. East Lansing: Colleagues P, 1993. 145-53.
- Hutcheson, Ernest and Rudolph Ganz. *The Literature of the Piano*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Knopf, 1964.
- Keck, George. "Musical Images in the Writings of Kate Chopin." Unpublished essay. 2003.
- Martin, Wendy. "Introduction." Martin, *New Essays* 1-31.
- , ed. *New Essays on The Awakening*. Cambridge: UP, 1988.
- Macleod, Beth Abelson. *Women Performing Music: The Emergence of American Women as Classical Instrumentalists and Conductors*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001.
- Neuls-Bates, Carol, ed. *Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Rev. ed. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1996.
- Olson, Judith E. "Luise Adolpha Le Beau: Composer in Late Nineteenth-Century Germany." Bowers and Tick 282-303.
- Reich, Nancy B. "Clara Schumann." Bowers and Tick 249-81.
- Schonberg, Harold C. *The Great Pianists*. New York: Simon, 1963.
- Seidel, Kathryn Lee. "Art is an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*." *Mississippi Quarterly* XLVI (1993): 199-214.
- . "Picture Perfect: Painting in *The Awakening*." *Critical Essays on Kate Chopin*. Ed. Alice Hall Petry. New York: G.K. Hall, 1996. 227-36.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Tradition and the Female Talent: *The Awakening* as a Solitary Book." Martin, *New Essays* 33-57.
- Tick, Judith. "Passed Away Is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900." Bowers and Tick 325-48.
- Toth, Emily. *Kate Chopin: A Life of the Author of The Awakening*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.
- . Per Seyersted, and Cheyenne Bonnell, eds. *Kate Chopin's Private Papers*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- Walker, Nancy A. *Kate Chopin: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.