

# The Impact of Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre on Gender Roles in Music

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**Abstract:**

*Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre was a French composer whose career spanned the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Marcia Citron has argued that female composers have notoriously been excluded from the canon of musicology for various reasons. Among these reasons is the difficulty impressed upon women of the time to achieve recognition as professional musicians. In examining the societal obstacles women faced throughout history, Citron lists four benchmarks to musical professionalism: education, publication and repeated performance, critical reception, and to a lesser extent, composition within larger genres of music. When one considers these criteria for musical professionalism in the context of Elisabeth Jacquet's career, which was filled with accomplishments, it becomes clear that she was one of the earliest professional female musicians, and warrants inclusion in the musical canon. This paper examines different aspects of Jacquet's career, drawing attention to how it contrasts from the careers of other female composers, particularly those who lived in later time periods, to demonstrate how she impacted musical gender roles and set an example of success for composers in general.*

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Since the middle ages, various women have devoted their lives to the art of music. Though societal circumstances often hindered them, many of these women found ways to create careers out of their craft. In her article "Gender, Professionalism, and the Musical Canon," Marcia Citron, a professor of musicology at Rice University, lists four benchmarks of professional musicianship that women were often excluded from: education, publication and repeated performance, critical reception, and to a lesser extent, composition within "larger" genres of music.<sup>1</sup> This led women to be excluded from the standard repertoire, or canon, of musicology. Among these overshadowed composers

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is Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre of France. Her career spans the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when Louis XIV was reaching the end of his reign, and French culture was changing. When one considers Citron's criteria for musical professionalism in the context of Elisabeth Jacquet's career, which was filled with accomplishments, it becomes clear that not only was she one of the earliest professional female musicians, but that she warrants inclusion in the musical canon.

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Determining Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's birth date has, until recently, been a difficult endeavor. Thankfully, due to the research of Catherine Cessac, a record of Jacquet's baptism has been found dated March 17, 1665. As it was common practice to baptize a child soon after being born in this time period, it is logically assumed that this was at least the year of her birth.<sup>2</sup> She was born into a musical family. Her father, Claude Jacquet, was a harpsichord maker and the organist at the church of St. Louis-en-l'Île, Paris. One of his sons, Pierre, later took over the organist position.<sup>3</sup> Anne de la Touche, Jacquet's mother, was a relative of the Daquins, a family of musicians in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Out of the four children, Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre made the greatest name for herself as a musician and composer. Most accounts refer to her as a child prodigy. According to an issue of the *Mercure Galant* published in July of 1677, she made her first performance at the royal court at the approximate age of twelve. The publication states, "She sings at sight the most difficult music. She accompanies herself, and accompanies others who wish to sing, at the harpsichord, which she plays in a manner that cannot be imitated."<sup>5</sup> In 1684 she married organist Marin de la Guerre. While it was customary at the time for female composers or performers to stop working after being married, Jacquet continued, publishing her first theatrical work in 1685.<sup>6</sup> She had a son who is believed to have been musically gifted as well at a very young age. Jacquet lived longer than her husband and son, dying in Paris on June 27, 1729.<sup>7</sup>

The details of Jacquet's musical education are for the most part unknown. However, knowing what her father Claude did for a living, Susan Erickson reasonably concludes that he was Jacquet's first musical instructor.<sup>8</sup> For a father to support his daughter's study of music in this time period was uncommon, and even more so for a father to be

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his daughter's teacher. This unique relationship and the education she received from her father ultimately led to her eventual performance for King Louis XIV, which likely marked the beginning of her professional career.

Around the time of the 1677 publication in the *Mercure Galant*, King Louis XIV took Jacquet into his court. Louis XIV was strongly involved in the fine arts, particularly music, during his reign. Jacquet came to know the King during the latter thirty years of his life, when he was losing interest in more extravagant musical displays, roughly ten years before the death of one of France's most influential composers, Jean-Baptiste Lully. The King did not completely lose his love of music, however, opting instead for more sedated concert performances at Versailles.<sup>9</sup> As a member of the Sun King's court, living amongst his children, Jacquet received an education under the direction of Madame de Montespan, Louis XIV's wife at the time.<sup>10</sup> It is unknown what her education entailed when Madame de Montespan began supervising Jacquet in the royal court, but given the King's love of her musical prowess, it can be assumed that some musical instruction was included.

Though Jacquet was not paid, the education and residency she received at the court was, in a way, a kind of patronage, setting her professional career as a musician in motion. According to Wendy Gibson, "of all the ways in which women intervened in cultural affairs the least resented and the most appreciated was undoubtedly that of patronage."<sup>11</sup> However, Gibson is referring to women as patrons, and not as artists receiving patronage as in the case of Jacquet. By participating in this reversal of roles within patronage culture, Jacquet further skewed the dividing lines between the "feminine" and the "masculine." Being this close to the King had benefits beyond that of patronage as well. The French music publishing firm, Le Roy and Ballard, "held a monopoly over music-printing in France for more than two-hundred years," beginning in the time of Henri II, around 1553.<sup>12</sup> This meant that, through this company, King Louis XIV had complete control over music that was printed in France. With the exception of one set of cantatas – the secular *Cantates françaises* – all of her pieces were dedicated to Louis XIV, all but guaranteeing her works would be published.<sup>13</sup>

In one of these dedications, her first published book of pieces for the harpsichord, Jacquet "speaks of gratitude to the king for support and for his interest in a *pastorale en musique* that she had written, 'a sort of

piece that no one of [her] sex [had] yet attempted.”<sup>14</sup> This quote tells us a few things regarding Jacquet’s professional career. First, it should be acknowledged that a female composer publishing her own music during this time period was highly unusual, yet Jacquet was able to do so in nearly every genre available and under her own name. Jacquet’s publications may have been possible because she cleverly appealed to the King’s desire for flattery via her dedications. Secondly, it seems that Jacquet not only knew how extraordinary it was for a woman to publish her own music, but she may have taken pride in the fact. According to Mary Cyr, “Elisabeth . . . accepted the limitations imposed upon her [by her gender] but went beyond them.”<sup>15</sup> In this way it can be said that Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre was somewhat of a rebel in the professional world of music, beginning her career with the endorsement of Louis XIV and ending it with artistic freedom.

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Jacquet’s greatest accomplishment is arguably being the first woman composer to premiere an opera at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris, a feat that would not be repeated until 1736.<sup>16, 17</sup> Discussing this achievement all but requires examining the state of opera in France at the time. Jacquet’s operatic effort followed in the wake of Jean-Baptiste Lully, the former musical director of Louis XIV’s royal court. Due to his high-ranking position and ambition, Lully established a sort of musical monopoly during his time.<sup>18</sup> This absolutist authority over music allowed Lully to establish French opera, which for him culminated in the creation of the tragédie lyrique style.<sup>19</sup> After Lully’s death, it is generally agreed that most operas performed for the public were poorly received.<sup>20</sup> This can be attributed to a number of things. First, Lully held a beloved place in the collective heart of the French public. To this point, Titon du Tillet, in his work the *Parnasse François*, declared Lully to be “le Prince des musiciens.”<sup>21</sup> In Tillet’s constructed hierarchy of French musicians and writers, Lully was the only composer to outrank Jacquet, who was the only woman included, found on the seventh level with the likes of François Blamont, André Campra, André Destouches, Michel-Richard de Lalande, and Roland Marais, to name a few.<sup>22</sup> Second, the church increased its efforts to vilify opera, calling it a “sensuous and inappropriate [form] of entertainment.”<sup>23</sup> This was coupled with the

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King's new-found preference for less extravagant performances, unlike that of opera, which is often "attributed to the religious conservatism of his wife [at the time], Madame de Maintenon."<sup>24</sup>

Despite all this, Jacquet set out to continue the tradition of the tragédie lyrique with her opera *Cephale et Procris*. When the public heard that Jacquet was composing an opera with librettist Joseph-François Duché de Vancy, it was highly anticipated by the public, believing that she was the most likely composer to succeed in the genre after Lully.<sup>25</sup> In fact, a letter addressed to Jacquet appears in the December 1691 issue of the *Mercure Galant*:

Although everyone knew you to be a very clever woman, they were surprised at such a grand piece of work. It is something that no other century has seen in your sex, and then that such a marvel was to be born, it is to the reign of Louis we are indebted for this prodigy.<sup>26</sup>

This letter, while perhaps intended to be complimentary, is somewhat problematic. The author first is surprised that a woman is capable of producing an opera, as if female composers possessed only the ability to create small works intended for salon style performance. They then go on to say that it is thanks to the King that Jacquet was so capable, rather than her own inherent musical ability, which she undoubtedly possessed as a child prodigy.

After much anticipation, Jacquet's opera premiered on March 17, 1694, and ran for five or six performances.<sup>27</sup> This short running time leads current music historians to quickly label the opera as a failure. While this is certainly a logical conclusion, it seems unfair as it reduces the value of the opera to that of the popularity it garnered rather than focusing on its musical merits or acknowledging the societal implications of a woman producing an opera. Unfortunately, in the court of public opinion, the opera was not a success. One possible reason for this was the overly complicated plot. According to Wanda Griffiths:

It is generally agreed that [François] Duché [de Vancy] was not an especially gifted poet. His livrets have a reputation for confusing story lines and poor poetry. In an age when the tragédie lyrique was considered as much a poetic art form as a musical

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work of art, the impact of a poor libretto on the opera's reception should not be underestimated.<sup>28</sup>

However, the excessive hype prior to the premiere and the various factors that plagued French opera in this post-Lullian time could also be said to have contributed to *Cephale et Procris*'s reception. One story that bears mentioning shows a little of what Jacquet's relationship with her husband was like at the time:

The day after the premiere, Monsieur de la Guerre, who loved and tenderly esteemed his wife, found himself with several people who were criticizing the new opera, imposed silence on them, telling them, "Messieurs, I assure you that my wife's opera is very good, it is only your overture that is excessive."<sup>29</sup>

In a time period when women were scarcely in the public eye, much less holding positions as professional composers, it seems Marin de la Guerre was ahead of the societal curve. The opera, regardless of reception, represents a success in Jacquet's career, and in the history of female musicians. It also qualifies as a composition within a larger genre, meeting Citron's benchmark.

The other benchmarks set by Citron, repeated performance and critical reception, are not as well documented in Jacquet's life, but existed nonetheless. Citron links the ideas of publication and repeated performance because in order for a piece to warrant inclusion in the canon, it needed to possess a longevity, which for larger works often meant multiple performances.<sup>30</sup> It is not clear if Jacquet's pieces were regularly performed by others, but she was performing into the later years of her life, holding public recitals which were "widely acclaimed."<sup>31</sup> As for critical reception, Jacquet lived before the invention of published musical reviews, which began with Robert Schumann in the mid-1830s.<sup>32</sup> However, the publications in the *Mercure Galant*, along with the apparent public discussion of her work in regards to the opera, point to some level of criticism of her music. With this in mind, it is apparent that Jacquet's career meets the guidelines to professionalism as dictated by Citron.

Elisabeth Jacquet's published works might not be quite as numerous as her contemporaries, but that does not lessen their significance. From her earliest years she displayed a level of skill so noteworthy that

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she charmed the King. Far from discouraged by societal expectations of female composers, she took on the challenge of grand works like opera. In Tillet's lengthy tribute to her, he writes, "one can say that never had a person of her sex had such talents as she for the composition of music, and for the admirable manner in which [she] performed it at the harpsichord and on the organ."<sup>33</sup> Even though he qualifies her work with her gender, he still points to her talent, and even declares it better than any woman before her. Despite all that, thus far little attention has been given to her, both in historical discussion and performance practice. However, this lack of attention is not a problem for Jacquet alone, but female composers throughout history.

My experience with studying music history is simply this: in discussion of music history, women are often relegated to occasional "fun facts," particularly within textbooks and their corresponding classes. Those women that are talked about regularly, for example Clara Schumann or Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, are often discussed due to their connection with their more famous male counterparts – Robert Schumann and Felix Mendelssohn respectively. This is problematic in that it sends a message to today's female musicians that the way to become part of music history still relies on men. Learning outcomes for music history courses also revolve particularly around male composers – J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Liszt, etc. Graduate school entrance exams for musicology will undoubtedly ask questions concerning these famous names, and therefore much of music history instruction must be devoted to them. With only a finite amount of time in college coursework to discuss all of music history from the Middle Ages to the present, the mentality seems to be that sacrifices must be made to cover the necessary material, and those sacrifices often end up being the women in history.

Where there is a problem, there must also be a solution, and I believe that there are two major things that we can do to create that solution. First, the existing expectations of learning outcomes for music history should be revised to reflect a more gender-balanced curriculum. Second, more women should be included in music history textbooks and score anthologies, increasing the likelihood of their inclusion in the canon. Naturally, these first two ideas go hand-in-hand. If textbooks and anthologies include more women, learning outcomes will change to reflect that. Conversely, if expected learning outcomes are revised, the textbooks and anthologies would have to follow suit. Therefore it

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is not an issue of which must change first, but rather that both must change together.

I propose that Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre would be an excellent example to begin this process. She warrants inclusion in textbooks and anthologies because of the accomplishments we have already established. Her oeuvre varies from smaller solo pieces to larger works like her opera, each demonstrating compositional techniques popular during her time. Historically speaking, I think it is important to note the things she accomplished for women's history in music, such as being the first woman to premier an opera, but beyond the discussion of progress for women, her gender should play no role in her inclusion. Simply put, Jacquet earned a greater place in music history than she is currently allocated, and by allowing her that place, we would empower women today by helping to remove gender as a requisite for success.

1 Marcia J. Citron, "Gender, Professionalism, and the Musical Canon," *The Journal of Musicology* 8/1 (Winter 1990): 105 – 110.

2 Cecilia Hopkins Porter, *Five Lives in Music*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 39.

3 Grove Music Online, s.v. "Jacquet," (by Hans Klotz and Catherine Cessac), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/14082>. (accessed November 13, 2013).

4 *Ibid.*

5 Edith Borroff, *An Introduction to Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet De La Guerre*, (Brooklyn: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1966), 6.

6 *Ibid.* 12

7 *Ibid.* 11, 14.

8 Susan Erickson, "Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre: Examining the Histories." In *Musics and Feminisms*, ed. by Sally Macarthur and Cate Poynton, (Sydney: Australian Music Centre, 1999), 42.

9 Robert M. Isherwood, *Music in the Service of the King: France in the Seventeenth Century*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 310 – 311.

10 Borroff, 10

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11 Wendy Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989), 168.

12 Oxford Music Online, s.v. "Le Roy & Ballard," (by J. M. Thomson and John Wagstaff), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/14082>. (accessed November 24, 2013).

13 Adrian Rose, "Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre and the Secular Cantate Française" *Early Music* 13/4 (1985): 530 - 531.

14 Mary Cyr, "Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre: Myth or Marvel? Seeking the Composer's Individuality," *The Musical Times* 149/1905 (2008): 82.

15 Cyr, 87.

16 Porter, 39.

17 Jacqueline Letzter and Robert Adelson, *Women Writing Opera: Creativity and Controversy in the Age of the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 17.

18 Kathleen Hoover, *Makers of Opera*, (New York: Beechurst Press, 1955), 39.

19 Douglass Seaton, *Ideas and Styles in the Western Musical Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 200.

20 Wanda R. Griffiths, "Introduction," In *Cephale et Procris, Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era* 88 (Madison, WI : A-R Editions, 1988), xii.

21 Grove Music Online, s.v. "Titon du Tillet, Evrard," (by Julie Anne Sadie), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/28023> (accessed November 11, 2013).

22 Julie Anne Sadie, "Musiciennes of the Ancien Régime," in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150 - 1950*, ed. by J. Bowers and J. Tick, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 191 - 223.

23 Griffiths, xiii.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

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28 Ibid, x.

29 Ibid, xii.

30 Citron, 106.

31 Borroff, 14.

32 Grove Music Online, s.v. "Schumann, Robert," (by John Daverio and Eric Sams), <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/14082>. (accessed November 25, 2013).

33 Borroff, 19.

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