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Julie Reisserová (1888–1938): Czech Composer and Feminist by Jean-Paul C. Montagnier

Miriam Blümlová

One may well ask how it came about that a French musicologist specializing in the sixteenth-century music wrote a monograph on a largely forgotten Czech woman composer of the interwar period. The answer is both simple and compelling: Jean-Paul C. Montagnier encountered Julie Reisserová's manuscripts by chance in a library in Nancy and was immediately captivated by them. What began as an editorial endeavor, producing modern editions of works such as *Březen*, *Suita*, and *Pastorale maritimo*, gradually evolved into a deeper intellectual commitment: the reconstruction of the composer's life and her artistic identity.

Monograph *Julie Reisserová (1888–1938): Czech Composer and Feminist* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), published within the Elements in Women in Music series, offers a concise yet remarkably insightful portrait of a composer who was once celebrated but later almost entirely erased from collective memory. The study fills a notable gap in both musicology and feminist cultural history by restoring Reisserová's voice to the narrative of interwar European music. The historiographical background against which this book emerges is marked by a striking paradox: during her lifetime, Reisserová enjoyed recognition at home and abroad, and as late as 1954 she was described in the *Grove Dictionary* as "the first Czech woman composer of importance." However, in the decades following the Second World War, her name gradually disappeared from concert programs and scholarly discourse. Montagnier's study responds to this silence with clarity, situating Reisserová at the intersection of musical modernity, feminist thought, and the socio-political complexities of early twentieth-century Czechoslovakia.

The book is structured into six parts: an introduction, a biographical chapter, a discussion of Reisserová's feminist engagement, an analysis of her musical works, a section devoted to stylistic considerations, and a concluding reflection. These are complemented by several appendices, including catalogues of works, chronology of documented performances, and archival sources. Particularly valuable is the list of public performances, which traces the reception of her music

between 1927 and 1950 (pp. 15, 72-9) and also offers an interesting glimpse into her posthumous presence. The author is explicit in his assessment that the marginalization of Reisserová's oeuvre cannot be attributed to any lack of artistic merit. Rather, it resulted from political and archival disruptions, especially those following the establishment of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Many personal documents and manuscripts were confiscated or destroyed due to the emigration of her husband after 1948 to Rio de Janeiro, leaving later scholars with fragmentary evidence. Until now, the only substantial study had been that of Jiřina Vacková (*Julie Reisserová: Osobnost a dílo,* 1948) which is valuable, but inevitably limited by restricted access to materials and marked by a somewhat hagiographic tone.

Reisserová's formative years unfolded within an intellectually vibrant environment that valued both artistic excellence and the advancement of women. Her studies with Albert Roussel in Paris, combined with her participation in musical circles across France, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark, and the Balkans, point to a distinctly cosmopolitan life. This mobility was largely enabled by her husband's diplomatic career, yet it also appears to have played a formative role in shaping her artistic voice and intellectual outlook. The breadth of her experiences abroad not only enriched her musical language but also fostered a notable openness to diverse cultural influences. Equally significant is her engagement with Czech feminist circles, particularly those associated with Františka Plamínková. As Jean-Paul Montagnier convincingly demonstrates, Reisserová's feminism was not merely incidental but embedded in her artistic identity. Her decision to pursue formal qualifications in foreign languages, culminating in state examinations enabling her to teach French and English, can be read in this broader context of intellectual and professional self-determination. It is also worth recalling that, prior to the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, institutional constraints such as the celibacy law prohibited female teachers from marrying, a regulation that remained in force until 1919. Such conditions inevitably shaped the horizons of educated women and may have further informed Reisserová's feminist convictions. Her writings and correspondence, as well as her Vienna Lecture from 1937 (p. 65-8) reveals a clear awareness of the structural barriers faced by women composers, as well as a persistent effort to challenge them. Rather than positioning herself on the margins of the musical world, Reisserová emerges as an intellectually engaged figure who actively negotiated and contested the limitations imposed on her gender.

Despite the brevity of the volume (92 pages), the discussion of Reisserová's musical works is substantive and carefully argued. There are analyses of her seven surviving compositions (*Březen*, *Suita*, *Sketches*, *Pastorale maritimo*,

Pod sněhem, *Slavnostní den*, and *Předjaří*) with attention both to their stylistic features and to their reception. What emerges is a composer whose idiom negotiates between tradition and innovation: her music incorporates elements of late romanticism while engaging with contemporary currents, including French impressionism. The influence of her training as a soprano is not surprising, as she herself remarked, she sought to treat every instrument "as a voice, so that each part can sing." (p. 60) The chapter on stylistic considerations (p. 52–63) is among the most thought-provoking sections of the book. The author moves beyond description to offer an interpretation of Reisserová's compositional language, focusing on rhythm, texture, and melodic construction as well as the use of lyrics. Alongside the harmonic analysis he considers the "Czech-like" aspects of her music, the importance of the inspirational sources as well as the education in Paris. In the joyful swirling dance movement of *Slavnostní den* in which Reisserová uses imitative counterpoint Montagnier identifies the influence of Roussel, "a wonderful teacher of energy" (p. 60), on other places he emphasizes the original orchestration or the unusual use of Chinese lyrics omitting the exoticism in music (p. 62). The author succeeds in demonstrating that her music resists simplistic categorization, a point that subtly challenges earlier tendencies to marginalize women composers as stylistically derivative.

As mentioned above, the broader historical dimensions of the study during and especially after Reisserová life are equally important because the author shows the cultural ruptures that shaped composer's posthumous fate, particularly the effects of the 1948 Communist takeover. His reconstruction of the dispersal and destruction of archival materials reminds the reader how fragile artistic legacies can be under political pressure.

Naturally, the format of the Elements series imposes certain limitations, specialists seeking exhaustive archival documentation or detailed musical transcriptions may find the volume somewhat concise. Yet this concision is also one of its strengths: the book manages to remain accessible without sacrificing scholarly depth, making it suitable not only for specialists but also for students and readers interested in feminist musicology or Central European cultural history. Given the current scarcity of secondary literature on Reisserová, this book is an indispensable contribution. Its multilingual scope, drawing on Czech, French, German, English and other sources, further enhances its value. The appendices, including aforementioned lecture, catalogue of her works and list of performances provide a particularly welcome foundation for future research and, one hopes, for renewed performance interest in her works.

This monograph does more than recover the legacy a neglected composer, it invites us to reconsider the frameworks through which music history is written.

By presenting Reisserová not merely as a "woman composer" but as a complex intellectual and artistic figure, Montagnier offers a nuanced and quietly persuasive argument for a more inclusive and attentive historiography. One leaves the book with the sense that this is not the final word on Reisserová, but rather an invitation, both scholarly and personal, to continue listening.