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Sylvia Kahan, *Music's Modern Muse: A Life of Winnaretta Singer, Princesse de Polignac*. Rochester and Woodbridge, Suffolk: University of Rochester Press, 2003. xi + 547 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-58046-133-6.

Review by Andrea Mansker, Loyola Marymount University.

Winnaretta Singer-Polignac, the subject of a recent biography by Sylvia Kahan, was the twentieth child of the self-made American inventor of the Singer sewing machine, Isaac Merritt Singer. Born in "The Castle," an enormous building made of solid granite located in Yonkers, New York, and raised in a modern mansion/playground dubbed "Wigwam" in the small English town of Paignton, Winnaretta was not the most likely figure to become the matron of the aristocratic salon in Belle Epoque Paris. Yet, thanks to the Singer fortune, a propitious marriage to Prince Edmond de Polignac, and her discerning ear for nascent talent, Winnaretta would ultimately establish a reputation for herself in *mondain* and avant-garde circles as the *grande mécène* of musical modernism. Singer-Polignac's influential salon on the avenue Henri-Martin became the breeding ground for several generations of some of the most innovative and renowned composers of the pre- and postwar years. During the course of her lifetime, this "dollar princess" commissioned over twenty pieces of new music, helping launch the careers of visionaries such as Emmanuel Chabrier, Gabriel Fauré, Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, Manuel de Falla, and Francis Poulenc. Many works requisitioned by and dedicated to Singer-Polignac received their first performances in her salon before going on to achieve international acclaim.

In examining the career of this enigmatic *grande dame*, Kahan is first and foremost interested in Singer-Polignac's role as patron and nurturer of the musical avant-garde. As Kahan writes, "Winnaretta's prescience in her choice of musical and artistic projects was remarkable: she always seemed to be one step ahead of musical trends" (p. xvii). Kahan pinpoints several important movements and pieces in modern music that Singer-Polignac was instrumental in bringing to fruition. For instance, Winnaretta's longstanding love of Bach and her interest in Hellenic language and culture led her to patronize artists whose work would inspire the neoclassical revival of the postwar years. In 1916, Singer-Polignac helped to revitalize Erik Satie's career and to give it new direction by commissioning a musical work from him set to *The Death of Socrates* and Plato's *Phaedo*. The result of this collaboration was *Socrate*, Satie's first large-scale musical composition. Performed in 1920, first in Singer-Polignac's salon and then in public venues, *Socrate* signaled the beginnings of a novel cultural movement and inspired a new generation of young composers to pursue a cleaner, more pared-down musical style.

Kahan argues that not only did Singer-Polignac's musical tastes influence the style of compositions she subsidized, but Winnaretta's *atelier* benefited from a new preference among composers for a small ensemble format. Witnessing Richard Strauss's opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* in 1912, Singer-Polignac appreciated the opera's efficient use of a chamber orchestra of thirty-six players and recognized the significance this novelty could hold for her salon. Winnaretta came to envision her *atelier* as the ideal place to launch a new repertoire reflecting this more intimate style. Kahan claims that in commissioning composers to write short works for a small orchestra of twenty players, Singer-Polignac helped launch a new genre: "great music for a small space by up-and-coming composers" (p. xvii). The space restrictions of Singer-Polignac's salon and the *mécène's* own directives also helped dictate the particular form and structure that certain modernist pieces would take. This was the case with Manuel de Falla's *El Retablo de Maese Pedro*, a work placing life-size marionettes among the musicians and making use of more modest instruments such as the harpsichord.

In asserting Singer-Polignac's central role in fostering avant-garde music, Kahan develops a larger point about the non-anachronistic nature of the Belle Epoque salon. Although a far cry from the intellectual and subversive salons of the Enlightenment era, Winnaretta's musical *atelier* was not the frivolous and superficial institution of a decaying aristocracy that has often been portrayed by scholars. Kahan argues that the first manifestations of musical

modernism were not primarily appearing in the public concert halls as has been assumed, but rather, in the salon. Experimental composers very much relied on *mécènes* such as Singer-Polignac to give them a first audience for untested pieces and to negotiate between the private, insulated world of the salon and the broader public world of the concert hall. As such, Kahan emphasizes the interdependence of the public and private spheres of performance during this era. Not only would Winnaretta's specific requests as a patron often shape the music that would eventually reach a large public audience, but Singer-Polignac also played a crucial role in sponsoring concert performances for artists after their debut at her salon. Kahan, for example, underscores Singer-Polignac's instrumental role in launching the public career of the internationally-celebrated female conductor, Nadia Boulanger. Sponsoring several concerts for her protégé at Queen's Hall in London, Singer-Polignac helped Boulanger become the first woman to conduct the London Symphony in 1935 and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in 1937. Thus, Singer-Polignac served as the judge and arbitrator for many a budding career, deciding whether or not to commission certain artists who vied for her attention. By the turn of the century, many composers and musicians were willing to tolerate the measly sums the princess was notorious for paying artists in return for the prestige and contacts an appearance at her salon could bring them.

Despite her argument about the fluidity of the public and private musical spheres from the 1890s to 1930s, Kahan's portrait of the aristocratic salon is nonetheless one which gives the impression of an exceptionally esoteric and sheltered world. Kahan pieces together a fascinating mosaic of a self-contained and self-referential culture of *mondain* decorum that was bent on shielding itself from the unpleasant turpitudes of twentieth-century politics and society. In recounting the endless procession of parties, fêtes, musical gatherings, and summer travels that defined the lives of Winnaretta, Edmond, and their aristocratic friends, Kahan describes a social strata whose greatest concern when faced with the pending international conflict of 1914 was that the war would upset their vacation plans. Events such as the Dreyfus Affair and the developments leading to the Second World War seemed to barely register on Singer-Polignac's mental radar. In 1934, for example, Winnaretta commissioned musical works from Ezra Pound and Olga Rudge to be performed at her residence in Venice. This recital served as a warm-up for a concert the two would give at the Fascist Institute of Culture in Genoa that same year. Though Kahan emphasizes that this political oblivion was "willful" on Winnaretta's part, her book nonetheless makes a larger statement about the self-absorbed nature of high society in interwar France (p. 317).

Positioning Singer-Polignac within this exclusive culture also allows Kahan to address the ambiguities and complexities of her subject's character. Kahan argues that, despite Winnaretta's avant-garde sensibilities in music and her unconventional sexual proclivities for women, Singer-Polignac adhered to a rigid aristocratic *snobisme* which often baffled some of her more eccentric contemporaries (as well as her former biographers) (p. 137). Kahan asserts that it was only by deciding to externally abide by such inflexible cultural codes that Singer-Polignac was able to enjoy the personal freedom she did. One good example of the way in which Winnaretta manipulated such conventions can be witnessed in her marriage to Edmond de Polignac. Given that both were attracted to members of the same sex, but nonetheless desired to maintain the proper protocol, Edmond and Winnaretta agreed to a *mariage blanc*. Behind the façade of matrimonial union, Singer-Polignac engaged in lesbian affairs with some of the most famous frequenters of Left Bank circles. After Edmond died, her relationships were carried out beneath the cloak of respectability. When traveling with a lover, she would often insist that other friends, or even the woman's husband, travel with them to maintain the image of propriety. Kahan writes that by outwardly adhering to aristocratic codes, Singer-Polignac "was able to negotiate the intricacies of Parisian society" (p. 137).

Though Kahan's argument about Singer-Polignac's adherence to external rules of behavior is convincing, one is left wondering how this insight might be applied to a broader analysis of gender. In considering how gendered expectations might have affected Singer-Polignac's patronage and decisions, Kahan cannot seem to decide whether Winnaretta was defying conventional gender roles or embodying them. She claims, for instance, that by 1894, Singer-Polignac had won acclaim "as a visual artist, society hostess, concert organizer, virtuoso pianist, and patron of music" (p. 90). However, Kahan immediately denigrates these achievements, explaining that these dealings were "nonetheless merely still part of the 'woman's work' that made up the activity of the women of the aristocracy. This activity served not to open and broaden the world of culture, but to fill a self-referential private sphere of action and influence" (p. 90). In other words, Singer-Polignac's endeavors were not necessarily breaking any new ground for women, and Winnaretta's accomplishments were doomed to remain within the restricted "private" space of the salon. In her reflections on gender, Kahan thereby attempts to draw a clear line between public and private spheres for women. This analysis runs contrary to the thrust of her argument throughout the rest of the book, which would

seem to suggest Winnaretta's crucial role as a mediator between these two realms and as a patron of numerous women who had "public" careers. In addition to aiding female composers and musicians such as Adela Maddison, Marcelle de Manziarly, Ethel Smyth, and the young Romanian pianist and prodigy, Clara Haskil, Singer-Polignac even gave discreet financial aid to the leader of the British suffragist campaign, Emmeline Pankhurst, thereby expressing her implicit support of the W.S.P.U's militant battle for the vote.

It is the difficulty of trying to reconcile these contradictions in Singer-Polignac's behavior that creates uncertainty in Kahan's own analysis. These inconsistencies might be better served by a more rigorous theoretical model than traditional biography allows for. As recent work on the "New Biography" indicates, there were numerous women in turn-of-the-century France who outwardly paid little attention to feminism or the "Woman Question," but who nevertheless were influential in broadening the scope of women's public identities.[1] Mary Louise Robert's recent book offers an approach to prominent and often misunderstood women such as Sarah Bernhardt and Marguerite Durand that could be fruitfully applied to Singer-Polignac. Roberts views these eccentric figures as culturally constructed "performers" of multiple identities. She demonstrates how, in acting out and re-enacting models of feminine behavior and respectability, these individuals were able to open up "subversive spaces" that ultimately uprooted traditional categories of gender identity.[2] The New Biography seems well-suited to Kahan's subject, and such an approach would allow her to overcome the dichotomy she at times creates between private and public gendered roles.

Winnaretta Singer-Polignac was a fascinating figure who, as Kahan makes clear, left an indelible mark on the musical avant-garde from the 1890s to the outbreak of World War II. Setting new rigorous standards for the musical salon, Singer-Polignac helped bring this institution to a prominence it had seldom enjoyed throughout the nineteenth century. Kahan's thorough and eminently readable analysis genuinely contributes to our understanding of Winnaretta's crucial role in fashioning this "serious" musical space. Kahan's book further gives weight to the idea that the avant-garde was not simply the public, masculine movement it has been portrayed as, but rather, one in which women played a central role.

NOTES

[1] See Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[2] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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