Photo courtesy of the Holman-Lecuona Duo

# In the Final Analysis

**By Benjamin Pomerance**

You can feel the punch coming from 10 miles away. Three names stand side-by-side on the next virtual program for the Piano By Nature concert series. There is Dora Pejačević, a gifted Croatian composer who died young. Then there is Ethel Smyth, who finally received a Grammy Award this year — seven-and-a-half decades after her death. Lastly, there is Ludwig van Beethoven, who seemingly needs no introduction. And the blow about to be struck seems firm and fair — two remarkable women historically overshadowed by men due to gender-based bias.

But then Hannah Holman and Réne Lecuona arrive with more of a story to tell, one that winds up leaving an imprint but not the exact impact that an observer would initially anticipate. “I think classism trumps sexism in many eras,” Lecuona begins. “When I started to closely study the lives of these women composers whose music was not being played now, I was amazed at how successful they were in their day.”


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Together, the cellist and the pianist have pulled back the curtain on this success. Lecuona taught a new piano literature course last fall at the University of Iowa that featured great works by female composers, many of whom were celebrated as first-rate artists by their contemporaries. Holman established a YouTube series exploring the lives and careers of female cellists throughout history, offering real-life tales that illustrate far more victories than defeats in spite of the male-dominated heritages of orchestras.

Ethel Smyth. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons

Two pathways typically led to these brass rings, Lecuona explains. A woman whose family boasted a tradition of professional musicians could find her foothold among the male-centric artistic ranks of the 19th and 20th centuries. But it was the other trail, the one apparently taken by both women featured on this upcoming program, that leads Lecuona to highlight the influence of social class. With the proper wealth and social standing, a woman could push forward, even to the front of a skeptical pack.

And yet the nagging anonymity of these composers lingers. The other plotline would have been far easier, of course, the familiar stomping on scars of discrimination on the basis of sex to explain why music by such talented writers is so rarely performed. Yet this is not how Holman and Lecuona approach their craft. Exploration epitomizes their artistry, a willingness to walk fresh-minded even into places that seem familiar.

Which is why, not so long ago, Lecuona was laboring over structural diagrams of Beethoven's second sonata for cello and piano. The detection of something previously unsensed — a seven-bar phrase, a novel harmonic gesture, anything to explain what the young and restless Beethoven was doing — would provoke giddy text messages to Holman, regardless of how late at night the breakthrough emerged. "I love to see if I can go back into the language of his time," she declares, "and try to understand his world."

When they peek into that world, a beautiful sight stares back at them: the artistic literati turning the color of their powdered wigs, shocked by this upstart who daringly did things that Haydn and even Mozart had never attempted and yet did so in a way that respected the past even as he plunged headlong into a future that only he could hear. "It's not traditional form," Holman says of this sonata, "and it is striking. You don't have to wear proper dress all the time. That's how I feel about Beethoven's music."

It's a sentiment that Smyth understood — both in its truth and in its peculiar societal impact. She commonly eschewed dresses for tweed suits and shocked London audiences when she conducted concerts wearing this garb that was assumed to be reserved only for men. The performance venues were cold, particularly in the winter, she explained, and wearing tweeds allowed her to ply her craft without shivering. Social commentators disagreed. Smyth ignored them and kept on dressing as she wanted, writing as she wanted and doing what she wanted.

She had been raised on a diet of such behavior, locking swords early with her posh-and-proper father on the issue of how a lady should act. John Hall Smyth was a major general in England's Royal Artillery, a man who would rather take a cannonball in the spleen than watch his daughter become a professional musician. Yet the artillery officer eventually surrendered. At the age of 19, his daughter decamped for the Leipzig Conservatory, ready to join the German circle that was springing up around Johannes Brahms.

After a year, she ditched the conservatory and embarked on private lessons with Heinrich von Herzogenberg, a man who admired Brahms every bit as much as she did and a leader of the European revival of J.S. Bach's cantatas. Eventually, von Herzogenberg introduced his pupil to Brahms, who apparently received her coolly — an outcome that may have been due to Brahms's coveting of von Herzogenberg's wife, who was one of Brahms's former piano pupils.

It was a different legendary composer — Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky — who praised Smyth's talents and urged her toward a compositional voice of her own. She found that voice in Tuscany, traveling throughout Florence and the Italian countryside with a minimum of baggage: a camel's-hair cape, a comb, a toothbrush, a bar of soap, an iron-shod stick, an ordinance map and a revolver. With Tchaikovsky's urging, she cultivated her skills in orchestration. In 1890, her Serenade for Orchestra received accolades in her native England.

Three years later, she practically unhinged London's Royal Albert Hall from its moorings with the premiere of her Mass in D. Critics opined that this was far different from any music that any other female composer was writing, massive in scale and in emotional impact, even drawing comparisons to Beethoven's choral creations. A decade after that, her opera Der Wald received performances in Berlin, at Covent Garden and at the Metropolitan Opera, where she took seven curtain calls on opening night.

She had done what she wanted, achieved what she wanted and then did the one thing that nobody in the European establishment wanted her to do. Not long after scoring her crowning musical glory with the three-act opera The Wreckers, required listening for anyone who believes that Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes is the last word in operatic tales of the sea, Smyth wound up in jail. Taking part in a feminist march, she had hurled a rock through the window of Lewis Harcourt, an anti-suffragist politician.

One day, Smyth's friend and musical compatriot Thomas Beecham visited her at Holloway Prison. To his amazement, dozens of women had gathered in the prison yard, singing the song that Smyth had composed two years earlier as the anthem for the Women's Social and Political Union. Smyth stood at the window of her cell, arms stretched through the metal bars, using a toothbrush as a makeshift baton to conduct the chorus of women outside.

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Yet her musical days were ending. Like Beethoven, Smyth's hearing faded. In 1934, when the Royal Albert Hall featured a concert devoted to Smyth's music, the Queen led the applause at the end. Smyth, however, heard nothing. The honored composer, similar to Beethoven at the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, had grown too deaf to comprehend the thunderous ovation. Still, she remained active as a writer, turning to prose and authoring 10 books before passing away in 1944 at the age of 86.

There was never any such coronation for Dora Pejačević, whose life echoed Smyth's at the outset but ended before she could enjoy Smyth's level of triumph. Pejačević's mother was a trained singer and pianist, but it was her father — the governor of Croatia, just as his father had been — who set the standards for their family. Just like Major General John Hall Smyth, Pejačević's father detested the notion of his daughter becoming a musician. Just like the major general's daughter, Pejačević opposed her family's rigid expectations and went her own way.

Yet unlike Smyth, Pejačević was largely self-taught as a composer. Her surviving papers reveal multiple self-guided exercises in counterpoint, instrumentation and other bedrock concepts of music theory. "Despite her wealth and privilege, she devoted herself to the life of the mind," Lecuona states. "She had the aristocratic background that allowed her to pursue this life. But she could have stayed home and been comfortable rather than going out on this limb and dedicating herself to learning how to compose."

When World War I descended upon Europe, Pejačević amplified her own discomfort, volunteering — as Smyth also did — to serve as a nurse. During the war years, she composed her best-known work, a sweeping symphony in the key of F-sharp minor, expansive and romantic, breathing optimism into a planet yearning for life after combat. Less optimistic were her writings about old-line affluence. "I simply cannot understand how people can live without work, and how many of them do, especially the higher aristocracy," she wrote.

"They are devoid of all higher feelings, far from all big ideas, any kind of humanity or any social progress," she continued in that same manifesto. "Such people for me are not aristocrats. They are quite the opposite." Ultimately, she reached a resounding conclusion: "The truth is that I cannot continue to associate with the members of my own class."

Amid this turmoil, tragedy struck. Complications following the birth of her first child on Jan. 30, 1923 proved fatal. Death took her on March 5 of that year. Her family honored her final request: to be interred beneath a headstone devoid of any family name. Instead of flowers at her funeral, financial contributions were collected for musicians throughout Europe who were confronting poverty. She left behind more than 50 compositions, including the sonata from which Holman and Lecuona will play one movement in this concert.

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In today's times, certain contrasts become apparent. Lecuona was a senior in high school when she asked her father if she should study medicine or music. Her father, a doctor, saw his daughter's passion for the piano and chose music. Holman, the offspring of a family of cellists, learned the instrument from her grandmother, studied at Eastman and then turned her back on it, enrolling as a pre-med major at Michigan State. Only after going back for some lessons with the pedagogue who had taught her in high school did she recognize that the cello was her voice.

"We all aim to execute perfectly, but there's more," Holman says of her realization that the lack of music in her life was devouring her. "We have to actually say something." Beethoven had said something about the triumph of humanity, youthfully breaking free from outmoded expectations. Smyth had said something about demanding equality for women from the opera house to the ballot box, erasing gender-based norms. Pejačević had said something about a brighter future, particularly for the ambitious worker rather than the musty aristocrat.

Now, this cellist and this pianist — women encouraged, not disparaged, by their families when their thirst for music emerged — have something to say. Holman laughs that her artistic approach is more instinctive, while Lecuona is more intellectual. But both are analytical, shunning easy answers and easy programming. Playing Pejačević and Smyth alongside Beethoven is the ultimate expression of confidence, declaring that the works of these two writers are equal in merit to a man whose name has become practically synonymous with music.

And plans abound for more. A grant from the University of Iowa is fueling Lecuona and Holman to continue researching female composers, and a first-rate label is already interested in the cellist and pianist recording at least one CD of their findings. If these seeds bloom, even as it remains maddeningly complex why these lustrous voices were kept silent for long, listeners will at last hear what a British suffragette and the free-thinking daughter of Croatian aristocracy and so many other women have to say. In the final analysis, this will be what matters most.

*Hannah Holman and Réne Lecuona will perform sonatas by Smyth, Pejačević and Beethoven in a program broadcast online on April 17 at 7 p.m. Admission is free, but donations are welcomed. To view this program or for more information, sign up online at pianobynature.org or email pianobynature@gmail.com.*