
JOANNE POLK
Awakening
Piano Music of
Cécile Chaminade
Vol. 3
STEINWAY & SONS

Awakening

From the beginning of time until well into the mid-20th century, the role of a woman in society was often defined as that of a caretaker who birthed children, raised families, cooked, and kept an orderly household. Only rarely did women enter the workforce, and this was especially true of women in music, where their participation was limited mostly to appearances in operas that required soprano voices. But any woman who wanted to compose found herself facing insurmountable hurdles to success, based on the accepted biological theory that women didn't have the same creative DNA as men.

There was, of course, a handful of women throughout history (from the Renaissance masters Francesca Caccini, Barbara Strozzi and Élisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre to the more famous 19th-century female composers Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn), who proved the exception to that theory. But the success of these women was partly the result of their connection to male relatives in the music business who were positioned to assist in the development of their careers. Despite the success of these few exceptional women, the dearth of female composers continued well into the mid-19th century, at which time they were finally released from household servitude and allowed to study composition at the major conservatories of Europe.

But just prior to that change of thinking regarding female composers, there appeared in both Europe and America, several women who managed to compose without a conservatory education. Among this group was the prolific French composer/pianist Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944). Although she was accepted into the Paris Conservatory, her father refused to let her enroll because he held the old-fashioned view that women of high society should never study music in a public setting. Instead, he arranged for Cécile to study privately with some of the conservatory faculty.

As a composer who lived across the turn of the century, Chaminade found the roots of her compositional style in the great Romantic works of composers such as Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms. For that reason, she composed in a tonal style that was common throughout the 19th century. Her catalogue of compositions includes a prolific list of approximately 400 works in all the popular genres of the time: a symphony, a ballet, two orchestral suites, a very popular concertino for flute and orchestra, two piano trios, and 150 songs (mélodies). But her most important and popular compositions are her over 200 works for solo piano. This group includes a sonata, two mazurkas, many concert etudes, and numerous salon pieces with programmatic titles. Chaminade rose to considerable fame based on these piano works, which she advertised through extensive tours across both Europe and America. Chaminade even wrote two instructive articles aimed at training potential buyers of her music on the performance of these works. The first of these articles appeared in *The Ladies' Home Journal* in 1905 under the title "How to sing and play my compositions," and the other was published in *Etude* magazine in 1908 with the title "How to play my best-known pieces."

As time wore on and music after 1900 turned to the modern atonal style practiced by revolutionary composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky, Chaminade found herself ever more out of fashion as she continued to write the kind of short piano works that had made her famous. But she, like most other female composers who lived across the change of century, refused to adopt the modern atonal style and serial techniques that characterized the work of her male contemporaries, and thus fell into obscurity in the final years of her life.

The recent resurrection of works by women who lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries has brought a treasure trove of new listening opportunities. Thanks largely to the efforts and dedication of pianist Joanne

Polk, this beautiful, well-crafted music by composers such as Amy Beach, Louise Farrenc, Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and Cécile Chaminade has finally come to light and is appearing on recitals by the most respected pianists of today.

Nearly all the pieces heard on this recording are miniatures, many of which fall into the genre known as "character pieces." These are works usually with descriptive titles, such as "Mélancolie," "Légende," "Méditation," and "Chanson Bretonne," the mood of which is hopefully hinted at in the title of each piece. Their formal structure is based on either a simple three-part (ABA) structure (as in Mélancolie) or on the alternation of two contrasting ideas (as in the especially beautiful "Méditation"). This recording also features six pieces collected under the title "Romances sans Paroles," (songs without words) that are clearly modeled after the more famous "Lieder ohne Worten" by Felix Mendelssohn. Seven more character pieces are grouped under the title "Pièces Humoristiques," which includes the title work for this album, "Reveil" (awakening).

In the final analysis, audiences and pianists alike are ripe for new repertoire, and the dissemination of the music of Cécile Chaminade (and others of her generation), thanks to recordings like this one, goes a long way to correcting decades of oversight and neglect of so much attractive music.

– *Dr. Jeffrey Langford, Professor Emeritus of Music History*
Manhattan School of Music



Pianist **Joanne Polk** was catapulted into the public eye with her recordings of the complete piano works of American composer Amy Beach (1867-1944) on the Arabesque label. Ms. Polk celebrated the centennial of Beach's Piano Concerto by giving the work its London premiere with the English Chamber Orchestra at the Barbican Center under the baton of Paul Goodwin. A few days later, Ms. Polk performed the Piano Concerto with the Women's Philharmonic in San Francisco with conductor Apo Hsu in a performance described as "brilliant" by critic Joshua Kosman of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Prior to recording the complete piano music of Amy Beach, Ms. Polk recorded *Completely Clara: Lieder by Clara Wieck Schumann*, her debut CD for Arabesque Recordings, featuring Metropolitan Opera soprano Korliss Uecker. This CD was selected as a "Best of the Year" recording by *The Seattle Times* and was featured on *Performance Today* on New York Public Radio. Ms. Polk's CD for Albany Records, *Callisto*, features the solo piano music of Judith Lang Zaimont. Her CD titled *Songs of Amy Beach*, recorded with baritone Patrick Mason for Bridge Records, was nominated for a Grammy Award. Ms. Polk's two-CD set of solo piano music by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, *Songs for Pianoforte*, was released on the Newport Classic label. Ms. Polk's solo piano CD, titled *Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn*, was released on the Bridge Records label.

In 2014, Ms. Polk's CD titled *The Flatterer*, solo piano music of French Romantic composer Cécile Chaminade, was released on the Steinway & Sons label. The CD was a "Pick of the Week" on New York's classical radio station WQXR and debuted at #1 on the Classical Billboard Chart. In 2017, Joanne Polk's CD, *Gershwin & Wild*, was released on Steinway & Sons. It features Earl Wild's transcriptions of Gershwin songs, as well as Wild's Piano Sonata. *American Record Guide* called Ms. Polk's playing on this CD, "plush and dreamily attractive..."

In 2014, Joanne Polk was named one of Musical *America's Top 30 Professionals of the Year* in an article titled, "Profiles in Courage." Ms. Polk's profile focused on her work promoting the music of women composers.

Ms. Polk received her Bachelor of Music and Master of Music Degrees from The Juilliard School, and her Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from Manhattan School of Music. She has given master classes at many summer festivals and universities across the country and internationally, and in 2018 completed a five-city, three-week concert and master class tour of Taiwan and China.

In 2019, two of Ms. Polk's CDs, *Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn* and *The Flatterer: Solo Piano Music by Cécile Chaminade*, were included on New York City's classical radio station WQXR's *Essential Piano Recordings*.

In February 2020, Ms. Polk's CD, *Louise Farrenc Etudes and Variations for Solo Piano*, was released on the Steinway & Sons label. In December 2020, Ms. Polk's Farrenc CD was on *The New York Times* "Best Classical Music of 2020" list:

"*The music of Louise Farrenc, professor of piano at the Paris Conservatory for three decades after 1842, has been taped before, but never quite so well as in Joanne Polk's sample of her solo piano music...*"
-- *New York Times [Best Classical Music of 2020]*

Ms. Polk's 2023 recording titled *The Silence Between the Notes: Louise Farrenc Solo Piano Music Volume 2*, was released on September 1, 2023, on the Steinway & Sons label.

In December 2023 and January 2024, Ms. Polk traveled to China on an 8-city concert and master class tour. In July 2024, Ms. Polk performed recitals and gave masterclasses at the University of Guadalajara in Mexico.

In September 2024, Ms. Polk's second volume of solo piano music by Cécile Chaminade, titled *Nostalgia*, was released on the Steinway & Sons label. *American Record Guide* January/February 2025 review of *Nostalgia*:

"*Polk has championed female composers all through her admirable discography. She has brought a wealth of great and enjoyable music to our attention, most of which has lived in relative obscurity since it was written. It would all be for naught if not for the exceptional musical insight and flawless piano technique she brings to these works... It is so good to hear world-class pianists like Polk choose a recital of Chaminade music and play it with all of the seriousness one would expect if the program were music by European male composers of the time.*"

Upcoming performances and masterclasses in 2026 include solo and chamber music concerts featuring the music of Amy Beach, in celebration of the 250th anniversary of America and the first successful American female composer. Included in these concerts and masterclasses will be the Lancaster International Piano Festival, Weisberg Hall in Hunter, New York, Ressona in New York City as well as the University of Washington in Seattle. In 2027, Ms. Polk will be touring with the music of Amy Beach (1867-1944) and Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944), in celebration of the 160th and 170th anniversary years, respectively, of the births of these groundbreaking composers.

Ms. Polk is a member of the piano faculty of Manhattan School of Music and is an exclusive Steinway artist.

Awakening Piano Music of Cécile Chaminade, Vol. 3

Recorded December 1, 2025 at Steinway Hall, New York City.
Producer: Kazumi Umeda
Engineer: Joshua Frey
Mixing and Mastering: Daniel Shores
Editor: Kazumi Umeda

Executive Producers: Eric Feidner and Jon Feidner
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Photo of Joanne Polk: Jeffrey Langford
Project Coordinator: Renée Oakford
Piano Technician: John Veitch
Piano: Steinway Model D #607799 (New York)

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Cécile Chaminade (1857–1944)

1 Étude Scolastique, Op. 139 5:46
2 Mélancolie, Op. 25 No. 1 2:50
3 Humoresque, Op. 25 No. 2 3:40
4 Légende, Op. 90 7:24
5 Prélude in A minor, Op. 84 No. 1 3:10
6 Prélude in F major, Op. 84 No. 2 4:41
7 Prélude in D minor, Op. 84 No. 3 6:55

ROMANCES SANS PAROLES, OP. 76

8 I. Souvenance 2:31
9 II. Élévation 2:25
10 III. Idylle 2:55
11 IV. Églogue 2:59
12 V. Chanson Bretonne 2:03
13 VI. Méditation 5:08

PIÈCES HUMORISTIQUES, OP. 87

14 I. Réveil 2:20
15 II. Sous bois 3:00
16 III. Inquiétude 2:40
17 IV. Autrefois 3:08
18 V. Consolation 4:49
19 VI. Norwégienne 2:15

Playing time: 70:45

Joanne Polk, Piano

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