

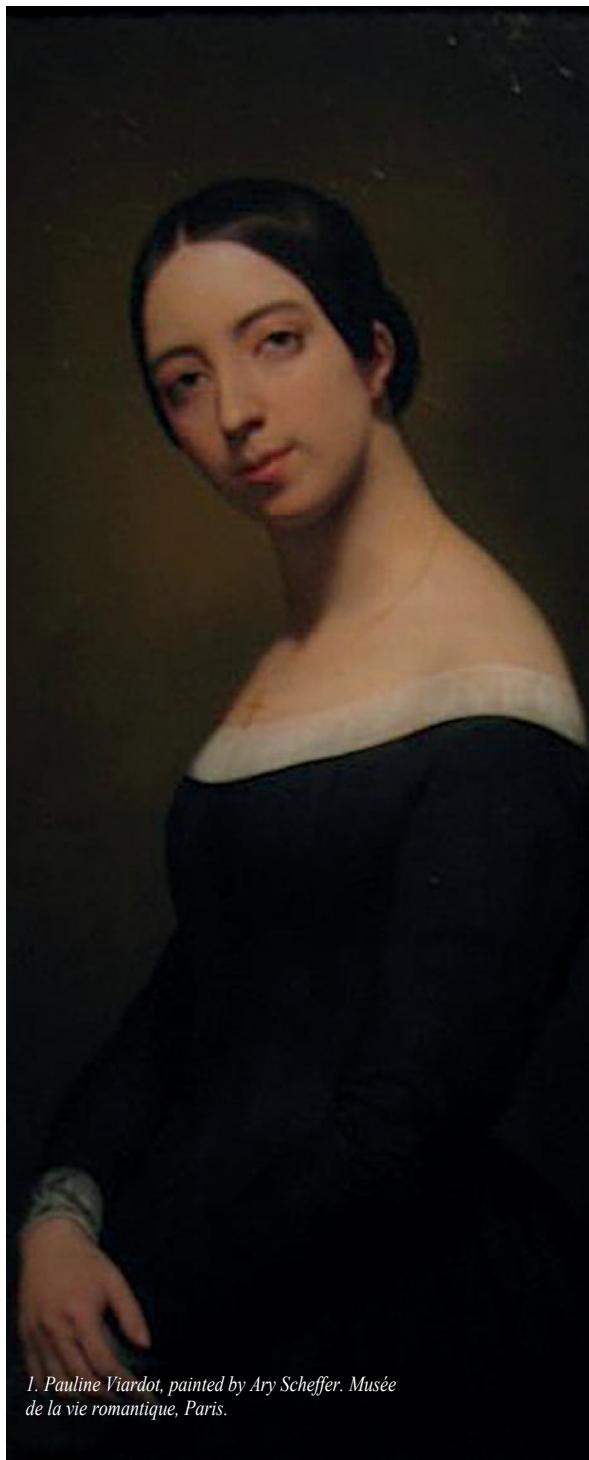


## Pauline Viardot, a life in music

*Olga de Kort*

The fate of a musician is fickle. Less than a few years ago the name of Pauline Viardot-Garcia did not ring a bell with many music lovers. Even musicians could not imagine what her name would be like. Only among singers and Russians her name sounded somewhat familiar, among singers because of her famous artistic family and the singing method of Pauline's father, and among Russians because of their fellow countryman, the writer Ivan Turgenev, who was in love with her. In both cases she was known through other great names, as 'daughter of' and 'lover of'. This is incomprehensible, considering how famous, influential and significant Viardot was in her time as a singer, composer and patron. Songs and operas were composed for her, poems were dedicated to her and people considered themselves lucky to be able to hear the voice of this singer. The world of music lay at her feet and she was carried everywhere.

Pauline Viardot, contemporary and friend of Clara Schumann, Franz Liszt, Frédéric Chopin, George Sand, Eugène Delacroix, Jules Massenet, Hector Berlioz, George Bizet and Camille Saint-Saëns, was born in 1821 and died at the age of 89, when everyone was under the spell of Enrique Caruso and Djagilev's Ballets Russes. No recording was ever made of her singing; her voice and stage persona live on only in cheering newspaper articles, reviews, letters, diaries and



*1. Pauline Viardot, painted by Ary Scheffer. Musée de la vie romantique, Paris.*

As a female composer with an established reputation as a great singer, Viardot could count on a certain amount of acclaim during her lifetime, but after her death there was no one left who cared about her music. When I was in Bougival in 1995, her house stood like a green ivy ruin, inaccessible through tall grass and nettles. In Baden-Baden her villa made way for the luxurious Park-Hotel & Spa, where nothing reminds of her except the sign at the hotel's garden gate. In Paris I could still find her grave on the Montmartre cemetery, but I could barely decipher her name, which had become almost illegible. The wilted rose on the grave spoke volumes. The fate of a musician is fickle.

### From Garcia to Viardot: 'a star of the first greatness'

Pauline Viardot was a true star, there is no doubt about that, and, according to Franz Liszt, it was only natural that one should be *"born into a family where genius seems to be hereditary"*.<sup>1</sup> She was blessed with a wonderfully warm singing voice, a sparkling personality and great charm. She was not beautiful, but she was intelligent, kind and talented in everything she did. Moreover she was very disciplined and strong-willed. She needed this as the daughter of a Spanish tenor and singing teacher Manuel Garcia (1775-1832), who was very busy preparing his two eldest children Manuel and Maria for the stage.

Manuel tried to resist this at first but finally gave up, invented the laryngoscope and became a singing teacher like his father. Maria debuted at sixteen and fled the musical "cage" of her slightly flammable father by marrying the twenty-five year old Eugène Malibran. She died at twenty-eight from the effects of a fall from a horse, famous, adored and idolized as the greatest singer of her time.

Now it was the turn of the thirteen years younger Pauline to show the world what Garcia's were capable of. That she would much rather have become a pianist did not count anymore, she had to stop her piano lessons to follow in the footsteps of her sister at the age of sixteen. Within a few months, however, she succeeded in stepping out of the shadow of the 'divine Malibran' and to establish her own name as a singer for good.

In 1838 Pauline married the kindly director of Paris Théâtre- Italien and art critic Louis Viardot, twenty-one years older than her and in every way the opposite of her temperamental father. It had been Pauline's friend George Sand who had seen the match and had done everything to bring them together. She was right: it was a happy marriage, which meant that Viardot was friends with all of his wife's residents, went along to tours and dinners, enjoyed his role as 'husband of' and quietly read the newspaper while the infatuated Ivan Turgenev sang his eternal love for his wife in all languages.

In the years 1840-1860, Pauline Viardot was a household name in the opera world. Théophile Gautier christened her *"a star of the first greatness"*.<sup>2</sup> Her voice had a range of three octaves and *"she sang as she breathed"*. Hector Berlioz expressed the general opinion when he wrote that *"Madame Viardot was one of the greatest artists ... of past and present musical history"*.<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens saw her in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* in 1862 and called it *"a most extraordinary performance - pathetic in the highest degree, and full of quite sublime acting"*. **455**



2. Pauline Viardot, photo taken by her grandson Pierre.

There are hundreds of testimonials like this - whoever saw and heard Pauline Viardot sing on stage became enchanted by her voice and actor's talent. During her twenty-five year singing career, she sang on all European and American opera stages. She was famous for her roles in the operas of Rossini, Bellini, Gluck, Gounod and Meyerbeer. Saint-Saëns dedicated his opera *Samson et Dalila* to her, Schumann his *Liederkreis*, opus 24, and Fauré - 2 *Chansons*, opus 4 and *Trois mélodies* (including *Après un rêve*) opus 7.

The triumphal trip to Russia in 1843 brought her not only success, eternal fame (she is still remembered in Russia as the first Western singer to sing in Russian) and financial stability, she also met the writer Ivan Turgenev there, who then left the motherland for his muse and stayed near her for the rest of his life. There was no newspaper in that

time who did not write about the violent infatuation of the very wealthy Russian, but as the years passed, his presence in the singer's immediate environment became as natural as the presence of her husband. Madame Viardot, Monsieur Viardot and Monsieur Turgenev - nobody knew exactly how it happened, and it is still a source of speculation for novelists. <sup>5</sup> For forty years they travelled together, rented and bought houses next door to each other, went to concerts and dinners together and spent quiet evenings together in front of the fireplace. They even died in the same year, first Louis in May 1883 and then Ivan in September. It seemed that Turgenev's mother was the only one who was troubled by it: she could never forgive that 'cursed gypsy woman' for taking her son and heir further and further from home.

After retiring from the stage in 1863, Pauline Viardot lived in Baden- Baden, London and Paris. Her eldest daughter Louise became a celebrated contralto, singing teacher and composer. The second daughter Claudie married the painter Georges Chamerot. The youngest daughter Marianne was initially engaged to Gabriel Fauré but married the pianist and composer Alphonse Duvernoy. Viardot's son Paul became a violinist, conductor and composer. Pauline herself taught singing and composing until her late seventies. Like her father and brother she developed a singing method that she summarized in her *Ecole classique de chant* (1861). Among her favourite pupils was Désirée Artôt, on whom Pyotr

fell in love with and whom he hoped to marry.

We can no longer judge Pauline's enchanting voice, but we can judge her compositions. Precisely these bring her back from oblivion.



## Behind the piano with Liszt and Chopin

Nobody expects a singer to play the piano part of her songs better than her accompanist, let alone that she composes her own songs, but that doesn't count when we're talking about Pauline Viardot. She was not a dilettante who could play the piano a little and adorned the score paper with a few broken chords, dramatic runs and trills. Pauline Garcia received her first piano lessons at age six from Marcos Vega, the organist at the cathedral in Mexico where her father was touring with his opera company. Four years later she began accompanying her father's singing students. Like Liszt and Berlioz, she studied counterpoint and composition with Anton Reicha.

The piano was her life, and according to Liszt she had the potential to become a famous pianist. Between the ages of fourteen and sixteen Pauline received weekly piano lessons from Liszt, lasting on average two and a half hours. She fell hopelessly in love with the then 25-year-old pianist, who was full of praise for her piano playing, but otherwise saw nothing in the little Garcia girl. Later the singer remembered how she went to her lessons every Sunday, with trembling hands and overwhelmed by emotions. *"At the ringing of the bell my blood congealed; at the sight of him, I got tears in my eyes. But he received these tributes without paying too much attention to them, regarding them as normal and understandable [...] Liszt's plasticity combined with the strength of his fingers justified the enthusiasm of his [female] listeners."*<sup>6</sup> As a famous singer, Pauline Viardot could count on Liszt's attention, as his letter of 1877 testifies: *"To admire you is what everyone does: but I flatter myself that for many years (beginning from our lessons in your father's house - rue des Trois Frères) I have excelled in this, and I have always been your very sincere and devoted servant. Franz Liszt."*<sup>7</sup>

At the age of fifteen Pauline accompanied her sister Maria Malibran in Liege during their first and last concert together. She made further concert plans but Maria's death two months later changed her life forever. *"Close your piano, from now on you will sing"*, her mother said.<sup>8</sup> The world was not waiting for another virtuoso pianist, but it was waiting for a new singer from the Garcia family, who turned the piano from "the purpose of her life" into the instrument in which she sought refuge. All her life she continued to play the piano and to amaze her listeners with her playing.

One of Pauline's biggest fans was Frédéric Chopin. At George Sand's country residence Nohant and the Parisian salon of Chopin and Sand, the singer and composer spent hours deciphering new scores and playing *quatre mains*. They also performed together, though not as often as Chopin would have liked. She was always on tour, like in 1841 when Chopin had to do without her singing during a concert in Salon Pleyel. He was extremely nervous and could use a friend by his side.

Chopin was very appreciative of Viardot as a pianist. When she asked him for advice on the use of a triple cross, he replied via George Sand that *"he never used it himself and never heard it talked about"*. But he thought that Viardot could feel free to try and get not only a triple, but a57

quadruple and even multiple double crosses could be introduced, because "everything was possible for her and everything was allowed to her".<sup>9</sup>

## Sung Chopin

Pauline compositions also met with great approval, and not only from her well-meaning friends and loyal admirers. Composing was part of her musical education. All the Garcia family composed their own music. Her father Manuel wrote numerous songs and Spanish zarzuela operettas, her brother Manuel songs for his students. Even Maria Malibran has more than forty songs to her name, which thanks to the Italian singer Cecilia Bartoli and her Malibran-programme resound again on the stage.



3. Six Mazourkes, title page.

Pauline Viardot's first compositions were not intended for public performance; she kept them for her friends and music soirées at Georges Sand's or in her own salon. She made an exception for her arrangements of Chopin's mazurkas, which she had arranged for voice and piano. She made fifteen of them, some of which were only saved after Chopin's death in 1849. The pieces that Chopin did hear, were 'approved' by him with great enthusiasm. In July 1848 she sang some mazurkas in London, with Chopin at the piano. Those were the composer's last performances. During a London musical evening for Viardot's friends, Chopin sat for two hours playing, as 'only angels' could do.

Later, Viardot expanded her vocal transcriptions to include Chopin's Nocturnes, waltzes by Schubert and Haydn's String Quartet opus 3 no.5. These vocal arrangements are very special. Pianists who accompany them are actually playing Chopin, but cannot get rid of the feeling that it is real Viardot music after all. To check my own impression, I talked to musicians who studied the compositions of Pauline Viardot and they all agreed: this singer and composer has created something really special with these arrangements. Clara Biermasz, pianist and artistic director of the Chopin Festival in the Netherlands, performed Viardot's songs with Karin Strobos during the second edition of the festival in Groningen. She was struck by how masterfully Viardot "used Chopin's melodies: she sometimes combined pieces from different mazurkas so that text and melody came better together in terms of sentiment, and she sometimes added her own improvisations".<sup>10</sup>

All the mazurkas have been given titles, and among the most interesting are *Faible cœur* (where the piano is a skilful and active partner of the voice), the lyrical *Berceuse*, the cheerful *Coquette* and the cheerful *La Fête*. Very pianistic and at the same time

Alt<sup>o</sup> brillante.

PIEW.

con brio

De n'aimer que  
Blôz ei ser. ce

PIANO.

8<sup>va</sup>

De n'aimer que  
Blôz ei ser. ce

2<sup>da</sup>

toi Je don-ne ma foi, Tra la — la la O fil - le Gentil -

3<sup>da</sup>

da Wierniejsze niż ja Tra la — la la Dzie-wecz - ko, koteecz -

2<sup>da</sup>

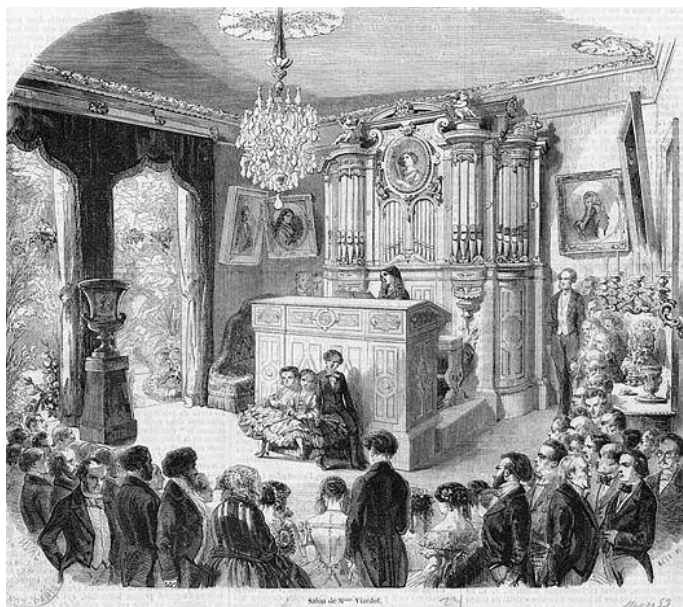
\*

2<sup>da</sup>

\*

#### 4. Pauline Viardot / Chopin - Coquette, mm. 1-9.

opus 24 nr. 1 (*Séparation*) and nr. 2 (*La jeune fille*) are inspired by Polish folklore. According to Biermasz, the composer "changed the rhythm of these folk songs to serve the instrumentation, or he left the rhythm intact and changed the melody." By choosing the French poems of Louis Pomey and giving mazurkas titles, Viardot gave this music "a different charge: they became salon pieces, from folk dance transposed into a noble dance," according to Biermasz. Speaking from her own experience, Clara Biermasz says that "in a programme of original mazurkas by Chopin and arrangements of them by Viardot, you feel as it were what blossomed in friendship long ago during the summers in Nohant." <sup>11</sup>



5. The drawing room of Viardot, with Pauline behind her Cavaillé-Coll organ.

In September 2021 I had the opportunity to hear Spanish pianist Alberto Urroz in a Viardot recital with Laure de Marcellus in Madrid. Their CD recording of Viardot's music will be released early next year. As far as Urroz is concerned these songs are more than worth to be heard and played again. As a pianist he was very happy with his part. It took some getting used to to perform the mazurkas with a singer, which he knew well, because his fingers "*sometimes automatically played more notes than Viardot's score contains*".<sup>12</sup> He could see from everything how good Viardot must have been as a pianist and how well she knew the possibilities of the instrument. Urroz thinks that these arrangements could help pianists to play Chopin's mazurkas better, because Viardot knew how the composer played them himself, where he placed accents and how he phrased. She translated this, as it were, into her arrangements.

As for the singers, they can certainly indulge in Viardot. As Laure de Marcellus aptly put it in our conversation, Pauline gives her contemporary colleagues the rare opportunity to sing instrumental music otherwise unattainable to them. Her knowledge of the singing voice is as good as that of Wagner and Verdi. She knows exactly how she wants her songs to be performed and is very clear in her instructions: breathe here and place an accent here to emphasize a certain emotion.<sup>13</sup>

### "Composing makes me happy"

Pauline Viardot's list of more than 500 titles consists of songs (*mélodies* and *chansons*), piano transcriptions, four operettas (three with libretti by Ivan Turgenev), the opera *Cendrillon* (1904), choral works, chamber music and some instrumental pieces. Together with George Sand (who wrote her novel-



She collected French folk songs, transcribed them and arranged them for the album *Chansons populaires*. Her operetta *Le dernier sorcier* was performed in Weimar in 1869, conducted by Brahms. The most recent performance of *Cendrillon* is Dutch. During the recent lockdown the opera was presented *online* by the students of the Dutch National Opera Academy.<sup>14</sup>

In the run-up to Viardot's bi-centenary in 2021, her vocal and instrumental music finally began to receive the attention it deserved. There are over 100 published songs by Viardot, each one with interesting piano accompaniments and often complex melodic lines with *fioritura* and *coloratura*; elements from the Italian *bel canto* style.

Breitkopf & Härtel is currently publishing the new two-volume, also first critical *Urtext* edition of Viardot's *Ausgewählte Lieder*.<sup>15</sup> The first volume contains the cycle *12 Russian songs* on poems by Pushkin, Fjet and Turgenev, and *5 Tuscan Songs / 5 canti popolari Toscani* on texts by Giuseppe Tigri.

The Russian Songs (1862-1864) were introduced in St. Petersburg by Anton Rubinstein as the album that all singing students at the Conservatory had to study. The music critic Hermann Zopff counted them among the "*Bedeutendste*" of "*Frauenhände auf diesem Gebiete*". He did see them as "*Resultat eines [...] ächt männlichen Geistes, der sich alles Subjective der Empfindung fast durchgängig unterwirft*". He praised their "*wirklich schöpferisch freier, melodischer Zug*" and their "*Zug wirklicher Polyphonie*".<sup>16</sup>

*5 Tuscan Songs / 5 canti popolari Toscani* is one of Viardot's most recorded and performed cycle. These are atmospheric, spirited and romantic musical scenes that evoke colourful images of Italian cities and landscapes.

The second part of the Breitkopf edition is devoted to the German-language repertoire. Among the twenty songs are lyrical, romantic, nostalgic and evoked compositions on poems by Goethe, Pohl, Müller, Geibel, Heine and Mörike, which also inspired Schumann, Brahms, Schubert and Wolf. It is interesting - also for pianists - to see how Viardot, who knew and sang the songs of others, gave her own interpretations to the texts. Many musicians who perform her songs for the first time are pleasantly surprised at how well the music matches the language of the chosen text. Norwegian pianist Monica Tomescu-Rohde shared this experience with me, having studied Viardot's compositions in all the languages. Viardot unerringly felt the melody and rhythm of the language. In her music language is as much a musical element as omens and dynamic signs: everything is connected and fused together.<sup>17</sup>

The same cheerful character and a similar effervescence of energy, virtuosity and bravura in combination with very beautiful vocal and lyrical melodies can be found in her piano works. The most striking examples of this are the Spanish jota *Alza Pepita!*, *Mouvement de Tarentelle*, *Gavotte* and *Sérénade*, with countless cheerful, fast runs, energetic rhythms and frequent *arpeggios*. At first glance this may not seem to be the most complex and fascinating music, but that impression is deceptive, just as is the case with more of Viardot's compositions. This characteristic to the piano<sup>7</sup>



. Pauline Viardot's tomb at the Cimetière de Montmartre, Paris.

# GAVOTTE

POUR PIANO.

PAULINE VIARDOT.

A Madame HAROUEL GARCIA.



# SÉRÉNADE

POUR PIANO.

par M<sup>lle</sup>

PAULINE VIARDOT.

A M<sup>lle</sup> Caroline Montigny-Réaumur.



8. Pauline Viardot - Gavotte (mm. 1-10) and Sérénade (mm. 1-9).

in all their timbre and dynamic richness. Then these compositions suddenly come to life and prove to be very worthwhile to play. As a composer, Viardot felt at home in all genres and styles, and also wrote music for instruments she did not play herself. Very interesting is her Sonatine pour piano et violon, dedicated to the violin virtuoso Hubert Leonard, her son's teacher. This more than challenging piece is full of technical 'acrobatics' and characteristic sounds of Spanish guitar. Spanish motifs also appear in her other compositions, such as in Chopin's favorite Spanish songs, which he liked to accompany during musical soirées and in

concerts.

## Time for reassessment and recognition

Getting to know the music of Pauline Viardot confirms what her contemporaries have known for a long time: here is a talented composer with her own personality. Whether it concerns arrangements or her original music, you immediately see what an excellent pianist and singer she was. Very characteristic is the verdict of Camille Saint-Saëns who, like everybody else, was astonished by Pauline's compositional talent: *"I don't know how she managed to master the secrets of composing.[...] The numerous songs she wrote on French, German and Spanish texts show an impeccable penmanship."*<sup>18</sup>

Franz Liszt simply concluded that she was always *"the first among the first"*. He is even reported to have exclaimed that *"there had never been a brilliant female composer - and now there is one at last"*.<sup>19</sup> Her compositions are solid as a rock, you can't pick out a single note, that's how well they are put together harmonically, melodically and technically for piano. Pauline enjoyed composing and already at seventeen wrote to her dearest friend Clara Wieck: *"Have you composed a lot? Yes? [Composing] makes me happy."*<sup>20</sup> Her works in turn make musicians and audiences happy who now have the chance to (re)discover this remarkable musical legacy.

*On the occasion of the anniversary of Pauline Viardot-Garcia, the Musée de la Vie Romantique in Paris is organising the exhibition 'Accrochage Pauline Viardot'. The exhibition will be on show until September 4, 2022.*

### Compositions by Pauline Viardot

#### Piano music

*Alza Pepita!*, VWV 3013  
*Andantino*, VWV 3014  
*Deux Airs de ballet*, VWV 3008 (1885)  
*Deux Airs de ballet. Malicieuse*, VWV 3017  
*Gavotte*, VWV 3007  
*Mazourke*, VWV 3012  
*Mouvement de Tarentelle*, VWV 3016  
Untitled, VWV 5003  
Untitled (Polka), VWV 5001  
*Sérénade*, VWV 3015  
*Suite arménienne* for piano four hands, VWV 3010  
*Défilé bohémien* for piano four hands (1874)  
*Introduction et Polonaise* for piano four hands (1874)

#### Arrangements for voice and piano

Chopin: 12 Mazurkas, VWV 4020-4031  
Schubert: 3 Walzer, VWV 4015-1017  
Brahms: 2 Ungarische Tänze, VWV 4019, 4039  
Haydn's Serenade from String Quartet op. 3 no. 5, VWV 4014

The complete list of works with the information on editions and recordings can be found in the *Systematische-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis* (VWV) by Christin Heitmann via [pauline.viardot.de/Werkverzeichnis.htm](http://pauline.viardot.de/Werkverzeichnis.htm).

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Liszt, F., Pauline Viardot-Garcia. *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Leipzig: January 28, 1859.

<sup>2</sup> Gautier, Th., *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France*. Bruxelles: Hetzel, 1858-59, vol. 1, p. 378.

<sup>3</sup> 'Viardot, Pauline', *The Norton Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, 1995, p. 475.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> Among others the novels *L'Amour d'une vie* by Olga Rachmanova (translated into French in 1996) and *Turgenev's love* by Daphne Schmelzer, Balans Publishers, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Archives Pauline Viardot. Quote in: Barbier, Patrick, *Pauline Viardot*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Franz Liszt to Pauline Viardot, 5 February 1877. Quote in: Barbier, Patrick, *Pauline Viardot*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Quote in: Barber, Patrick. *Pauline Viardot*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from George Sand to Pauline Viardot, s.d., winter 1839-1840. Quote in: Barbier, Patrick, *Pauline Viardot*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Clara Biermasz, 4 October 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Idem.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Alberto Urroz, October 2, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Laure de Marcellus, October 1, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> Opera *Cendrillon* by Dutch National Opera Academy, *live stream* on 26 April 2021, 'Opera zonder Straat 2021', Bredeweg Festival.

<sup>15</sup> Viardot-Garcia, Pauline, *Ausgewählte Lieder*. Urtext. Breitkopf & Härtel, Band 1, EB 8887 & Band 2, EB 8888.

<sup>16</sup> Hermann Zopff, 'Kammer- und Hausmusik'. *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Leipzig: 23 June 1865. Quote in: Viardot-Garcia, Pauline, *Ausgewählte Lieder*. Urtext. Breitkopf & Härtel, Band 1, p. IX.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Monica Tomescu-Rohde, October 5, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Quote in: Barbier, Patrick, *Pauline Viardot*. Paris: Grasset, 2009, p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> Idem, pp. 82-83.

<sup>20</sup> Idem, p. 70.

**M MUZIEKGEBOUW**  
FRITS PHILIPS **EINDHOVEN**

Mikhail Pletnev

VR 17 DEC

**Lucas & Arthur Jussen**

Behind the Music: interactieve avond

WO 26 JAN

**Mikhail Pletnev**

MA 7 FEB

**Denis Kozhukhin**

& Janine Jansen

DO 10 FEB

**Leif Ove Andsnes**

& Deutsches Sinfonieorchester Berlin

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& David Orlowski  
& Anastasia Kobekina

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