

Cover of the promotional pamphlet *Music at the Pan-American Exposition* (courtesy of the Theodore Roosevelt Inaugural Site Foundation)

TRAILBLAZING WOMEN ORGANISTS OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

This article is the second in a series devoted to “A Global Perspective on Women and the Organ.” In the January issue of TAO, I discussed evidence from ca. 250 BCE through 250 CE for the earliest organists, many of whom were women who played the hydraulis. In this article, Anne Laver explores changing attitudes toward “lady organists” in the United States almost two millennia later. The series will continue in the May issue with information from Joy-Leilani Garbutt about women organists at the Paris Conservatory.

KIMBERLY MARSHALL
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By Anne Laver

The years 1890–1920, often referred to as the Progressive Era, brought about tremendous growth for organ culture in the United States. Organbuilders embraced new technology and produced impressive instruments at record pace; the world’s fairs in Chicago, Buffalo, and St. Louis codified a model for the solo organ recital that attracted audiences in the thousands; and a group of committed musicians established the American Guild of Organists in 1896, to further elevate the church music profession and provide educational opportunities for members.¹ Women’s lives also changed dramatically in this period. More and more women participated in activities outside the home, such as postsecondary education, work, and civic clubs. The movement for women’s suffrage shifted from the fringes to the political mainstream, ultimately culminating in the 19th Amendment in 1920. This confluence of a flourishing organ culture and changing attitudes toward women created a fertile environment for women organists in the United States to gain widespread acceptance and recognition as concert musicians for the first time.

“Lady Organists”

Women organists occasionally surface in the annals of the early 19th century, such as Sophia Hewitt (1800–1846), organist for Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society in the 1820s; composer and organist Faustina Hasse Hodges (1822–1895); and Lillian Frohock (1842–1927), the first woman invited to play on the inaugural recital series of the Boston Music Hall organ in 1864.² Historical newspapers also provide ample evidence to suggest that many parish churches in the United States were served by “lady organists,” as they were known in the 19th century. However, a description of the stereotypical “lady organist” published in one Buffalo, New York, newspaper in 1881 suggests that female church organists may not have been given much respect. The article begins:

The lady organist is generally but recently emerged from school girlhood. She plays hymn tunes and chants for interludes, repeating the last line of the hymn, while her voluntaries are little fragments selected from “The Young Organist’s Companion,” or some similar work. She cannot manage the pedals very well, but her taste in the choice of stops is fairly good. She takes pains to fill her position creditably, is always on hand at rehearsals, and is altogether of decided use to the congregation. Generally she plays for nothing, or the church may give her a salary of about half the amount it would offer to a man who plays no better. By and by the lady organist gets married, and then her career of usefulness is over and some other blushing maiden steps into her place. Occasionally will be found a mature lady organist of rare ability and of a masculine turn of mind. She is intensely classical and plays only the most dreary fugues or sleepy organ concertos.³

The author insinuates that “lady organists” were generally unmarried, unpaid, and relatively unskilled. Although the article presents something of a caricature, it also suggests that women church organists were common enough to have generated a stereotype.

A search for the term “lady organist” in newspapers from the 1890s starts to return a different kind of result. In this decade, we begin to see more announcements of respected female organists giving recitals. An announcement in the Waterloo, Iowa, *Courier* on December 5, 1895, provides a good example:

On Tuesday evening next, Dec. 10th, the fine pipe organ being placed in Grace Church will be dedicated. . . . The celebrated organist, Mrs. Chandler Starr, of Rockford, Ill., and the Rockford Quartette, vocalists, have been engaged at great expense for the concert. Mrs. Starr is pronounced by musical critics to be the most accomplished lady organist this side [of] the Atlantic, and the vocalists are rapidly gaining an equally enviable reputation.⁴

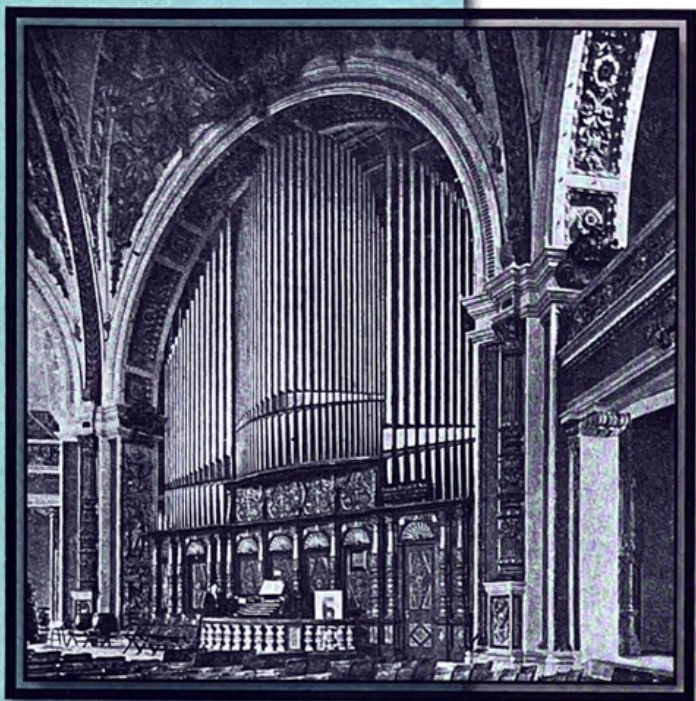
In another example from May 1898, the *Evening Republican* of Meadville, Pennsylvania, ran a glowing review of Mrs. Flavia D. Porter’s concert at Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church in Oil City:

She stands in the front rank of lady organists in America, as was fully evidenced by her performance last evening. In all her selections, whether light or grave, she showed her complete mastery of the instrument, both in registration and execution, and played with a vigor and energy quite unusual among her compeers [*sic*] at the instrument.⁵

These excerpts paint a different picture of an accomplished “lady organist”—one who served a congregation, gave recitals for compensation, and continued as a professional musician after marrying. That they are mentioned as “lady organists,” as opposed to simply “organists,” suggests that a concertizing female organist was still something of a novelty.

One female organist from this period who successfully balanced concert activities with church work and gained widespread recognition was Mary Chappell Fisher. Born in 1864 to a musical family in Auburn, New York, Mary Chappell studied with Isaac Flagler in Auburn, Gerrit Smith in New York, and Alexandre Guilmant in Paris. After marrying a lawyer named Frank Fisher in 1888, she served as organist for various churches in Rochester. She was one of the two female founders of the American Guild of Organists.⁶

In an article for *The Etude* magazine in 1901, Mary Fisher acknowledged the changing landscape for women organists in her lifetime: “The prejudice against women as church-organists is fast disappearing, since the new woman has proved herself in this line, as in others, to be fully equal to the demands of the average organ-loft in church-service.” In the same article, she acknowledged that concertizing required “constant work,” but she believed there was “no reason why women should not succeed as concert-organists, provided they have sufficient talent, time, and strength to devote to its exacting requirements.”⁷



The Emmons Howard organ in the Temple of Music at the Pan-American Exposition (uncredited photo from the January 1970 issue of *The Tracker*, used with permission from the Organ Historical Society)

FISHER, MARY CHAPPELL

Born December 19, 1864, in Auburn, N. Y., and now lives in Rochester, N. Y. She began her musical education with her father, Newton Chappell, continuing with I. V. Flagler of Auburn, and later with Gerrit Smith, New York, and Alexandre Guilmant, Paris. She was for fourteen years organist and choir director at the First Baptist Church, Auburn, and for five years organist at the First Presbyterian Church, Rochester. She is now organist at St. Peter's Presbyterian Church, Rochester, and was one of the founders of the Guild of American Organists.



Mary Chappell Fisher (photo and bio from *Music at the Pan-American Exposition*, courtesy of the Buffalo History Museum)

The Buffalo Exposition

If there was one event that represented the advances women organists were making on the burgeoning concert scene in the United States, it was the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. The previous world's fair, the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, had included a significant organ recital series, but no women were invited to perform.⁸ Simon Fleischmann, the local organist and lawyer chosen to oversee the Buffalo Exposition organ program, chose to curate a recital series that did feature women organists.⁹ The brochure announcing music at the fair highlighted this defining feature: "A special effort has been made to secure a large representation of women organists throughout the United States, who have won distinction as performers upon this instrument, and this feature should prove of especial interest."¹⁰ Seven recitalists were invited to perform on the official series: Mary Chappell Fisher, Emily Loucetta Maynard, Mary Florence McConnell, Gertrude Sans-Souci, Fanny Morris Spencer, Ione Bush Riddell, and Mrs. P.V.M. Raymond.¹¹

Mary Chappell Fisher had the most prominent performing profile of this group of women, and as such she was granted three recitals at the exposition. The announcement of her engagement was met with considerable excitement in the Buffalo press. A March 1901 headline in the *Buffalo Times* announced, "Has Engaged Mrs. Fisher—Rochester Organists Secured by Fleischmann for Pan-Am."¹² The *Buffalo Courier* reported "immense crowds" at Fisher's organ recitals, prompting the headline that the 2,200-seat "Temple of Music [Was] Much Too Small."¹³

The eight women recitalists featured in Buffalo demonstrated a range of experiences and approaches to concertizing. Some, like Mary Fisher, opted for a more "serious" program, which meant including staples of the organ repertoire by Bach and Guilmant.¹⁴ Others, like Gertrude Sans-Souci, chose to highlight transcriptions and lighter fare. Most collaborated with vocalists, as was the custom. Some, like Fisher and Sans-Souci, had studied in Europe. Others, such as Ione Riddell, held degrees from American institutions. In addition to their concert work, these women were also active as teachers, composers, and church organists.¹⁵

Fleischmann's series was a significant milestone for women organists in the early 1900s, but it also revealed that gender equity in the organ world was still far off. The seven women recitalists constituted less than 10 percent of the 80 total recitalists. Women composers were nearly absent from the

4:30 P. M.

TEMPLE OF MUSIC.

65th Free Organ Recital.

MARY CHAPPELL FISHER, ROCHESTER.

- 1 Toccata and Fugue in D minor.....Bach,
- 2 Idylle..... Rheinberger
- 3 Prelude..... Rachmaninoff
- 4 First Lux, (Let There be Light)..... Dubois
- 5 The Manger..... Guilmant
(Pastorale and Adoration.)
- 6 Sonata 7, op., 86..... Guilmant
a. Allegro con fuoco; b. Meditation. c. Fugue, Adagio.
- 7 Finale from Symphony 8.....Widor

Mary Chappell Fisher's July 26, 1901, organ recital program at the Pan-American Exposition (reprint of original program courtesy of the Buffalo History Museum)

concert programs in Buffalo (exposition organists played over 1,585 pieces collectively, but only 13 of these were by women).¹⁶ Women of color were completely absent from these large events, and barriers to even modest representation continued long into the 20th century. Finally, while published reviews of women's recitals were generally positive, some still questioned women's abilities. Mary McConnell, in her role as music critic for the *Buffalo News*, chose to tackle some of these prejudices in her July 28, 1901, column, after hearing an audience member comment on Mary Fisher's exposition recital:

To hear the average person talk about organ playing makes one absolutely hopeless as to the possibility of people ever realizing that organ playing is not a question of physical strength and labor. . . . As one of the up-to-date organists visiting here recently said: "Organ playing is a question of brains, not of strength."

But unfortunately for the women organists, the average audience accepts as necessarily good, the indifferent work of many men organists, but the women must play doubly well to be appreciated, and then wonderful of compliments: "She plays as well as the men do!" It is nearly time that the ears would judge of a musical performance. They are the only competent judges.¹⁷

Sharing the stories of Mary Chappell Fisher, Mary McConnell, and the many other "lady organists" of the Progressive Era complicates and enriches our understanding of organ culture at the dawn of the 20th century. Women organists made important contributions as church musicians, teachers, and concert organists in this period, and they—along with allies like Simon Fleischmann—laid the groundwork for the important achievements of subsequent generations of women organists in the United States.

McCONNELL, MARY FLORENCE

Born in Lockport, and lives in Buffalo, N. Y. She was educated under the Sisters of St. Mary's, Lockport, Alfred Pease, W. O. Brewster, Miss Pittar, William S. Waithe and John Lund of Buffalo, S. B. Whitney and Dr. Maas of Boston, and S. P. Warren of New York City. She is assistant supervisor of music in the public schools of Buffalo and musical editor of the *Buffalo News*. She has been organist of the Central Presbyterian Church, St. Paul's Church and St. Joseph's Cathedral. She presided at the organ in St. Joseph's Cathedral during the consecration services of the Rt. Rev. Bishop Quigley, and during the jubilee of Rt. Rev. Bishop Ryan, Cardinal Satolli officiating. She has been the accompanist for the Orpheus concerts during the past six seasons and for many of the orchestra concerts given in Buffalo.



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NOTES

1. Anne Laver, "Blending the Popular and the Profound: Organ Concerts at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago," *Journal for the Society of American Music* 16, no. 2 (May 2022): 179–80. Barbara Owen, "One Hundred Years Ago: The Founding of the AGO," *The American Organist*, Jan. 1996, 35.

2. See Christine Ammer, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music* (Portland, Oreg.: Amadeus Press, 2001), 17, 95, for accounts of Sophia Hewitt and Faustina Hasse Hodges. See Barbara Owen, *The Great Organ at Methuen* (Richmond, Va.: Organ Historical Society Press, 2011), 85–86, 91, for discussion of Lillian Frohock's recital on the Boston Music Hall organ.

3. "[Lady organists]," *Buffalo Morning Express*, Sept. 3, 1881, 3.

4. "[On Tuesday evening next, Dec. 10th]," *Courier* (Waterloo, Iowa), Dec. 5, 1895, 7.

5. "Evening Echoes," *Evening Republican* (Meadville, Pa.), May 2, 1898, 4.

6. *Music at the Pan-American Exposition: Organists, Orchestras, Bands* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Gies & Co., 1901), 13. This was a promotional pamphlet that included profiles of all the organists engaged to perform at the exposition.

7. Mary Chappell Fisher, "Women as Concert-Organists," *The Etude*, Sept. 1901, 332.

8. See Anne Laver, "Blending the Popular and the Profound," 183 (appendix), for a list of performers at the World's Columbian Exposition.

9. Simon Fleischmann was an organist, music critic, lawyer, and local Buffalo politician. His sister, Bianca Fleischmann, was also an organist. Mr. Fleischmann's final report to director general William Buchanan suggests that he was granted total autonomy over the organ recital series at the exposition. "Report on Organ Music Recitals and Organists," box 9, folder 18, William I. Buchanan Papers, Buffalo History Museum.

10. *Music at the Pan-American Exposition*, 6.

11. The programs for the exposition exist in a bound volume at the Buffalo History Museum titled *Official Daily Program of the Pan-American Exposition* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Pan-American Program Company, 1901). The author has created a spreadsheet that captures information from the official programs; it can be accessed at <https://annelaver.com/worlds-fair-projects>.

12. "Has Engaged Mrs. Fisher," *Buffalo Times*, Mar. 23, 1901, 7.

13. "Temple of Music Much Too Small," *Buffalo Courier*, July 28, 1901, 22.

14. For a discussion of how American concert organists mixed "popular" and "artistic" elements on their exposition programs, see Anne Laver, "Blending the Popular and the Profound," 153–83.

15. See performers' biographies in *Music at the Pan-American Exposition*, 7–21.

16. Eleven of the 13 pieces by women composers on Buffalo programs were vocal solos with organ accompaniment: "The Lord Is My Light" (two performances), "As Pants the Hart" (two performances), "Love Is a Bubble" (two performances), "There's a Land" by British composer Frances Allitsen, Florence Aylward's "Beloved, It Is Morn," Eva Dell'Acqua's "Villanelle" (two performances), Grace Mayhew's "The Shoogy Shoo-Shoo," and Kate Vannah's "Cradle Song." Buffalo programs also included a piece called "Supplication" by Kate Vanderpoel and a Prelude in D Minor by Cécile Chaminade, possibly her Op. 78 for organ solo. For a searchable spreadsheet of all repertoire performed at the Buffalo exposition, visit <https://annelaver.com/worlds-fair-projects>.

17. Mary McConnell, "Organists at the Pan-American," *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, July 28, 1901, 7. There is no byline for this article, but Mary Fisher quotes it verbatim and acknowledges the author as McConnell in her article "Prejudice against Women Organists" in *The Etude*, July 1909, 484.

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