Jacqueline Piatigorsky's Bassoon

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Jacqueline and Gregor Piatigorsky: Photographer unknown, c. 1940s. Gelatin silver print. Collection of Evan Drachman.

It might be exceptional for a story about the significance of music in the lives of the famed couple Gregor and Jacqueline Piatigorsky to concentrate not on world-famous concert cellist Gregor, but on Jacqueline, one of the top female chess players in the United States in the late 1950s and 1960s, whose activities as a musician remain largely unknown, even to her admirers. Yet her occasional musical undertakings provide further insight into the unique nature of the relationship between Gregor and Jacqueline, a singularly talented and philanthropic partnership. Indeed, one of the least known—yet deeply meaningful—signifiers of their storied union remains, of all things, a bassoon, which is currently featured along with several other items from the family archive in the exhibition *Sound Moves: Where Music Meets Chess*, on view at the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis through January 28, 2024.

Born into the wealthy Rothschild family, Jacqueline grew up in circumstances of tremendous privilege but also punishing isolation, raised by unsympathetic parents and a manipulative nanny. Jacqueline later credited the outgoing, even adventurous temperament she adopted as an adult to her early years of solitude. Competitive by nature, Jacqueline was drawn to chess at an early age, and later studied with U.S. Chess champion Herman Steiner. She would go on to represent the United States in the first Women's Chess Olympiad in 1957 and compete in several U.S. Women's Championships in the 1960s, peaking at a #2 women's ranking in the United States. After retiring from chess, she won numerous National Senior Tennis Championships as a doubles player in the 1980s and 1990s, and became an accomplished sculptor. Today, Jacqueline is as celebrated for her philanthropy as an indefatigable supporter of U.S. chess as she is for her prodigious talents, and, in recognition of her benevolence and dedication to the game, she was inducted into the U.S. Chess Hall of Fame in 2014.

Like much in her generally unhappy childhood, music provided no respite from her malaise. She attempted to learn the violin but found that she had no ear for it. Despite her protestations that she lacked any musical talent, her mother arranged for her to study the

Bassoon by Triébert France belonging to Jacqueline Piatigorsky, c. 1930s. Collection of Evan Drachman. Photograph courtesy of The World Chess Hall of Fame.

piano with Yvonne Lefébure, a French prodigy who had studied with one of the greatest pianists of his generation, Alfred Cortot. At sixteen, Jacqueline accompanied Lefébure to see Cortot perform live, and she instantaneously fell deeply in love with the virtuoso. For many years she awkwardly pursued the considerably older Cortot, who generally treated her with indifference (he had both a wife and a mistress already). Her agonizingly drawn-out pursuit of Cortot ultimately resulted in the dissolution of her first marriage, a loveless one arranged by her mother that lasted five onerous years. While pining after the disinterested Cortot in Paris, Jacqueline was introduced to the Ukrainian-born Gregor, with whom she quickly developed a powerful bond. Though their upbringings could not have been more different—hers sheltered and chauffeured and his spent surviving pogroms and supporting his family as a child playing cello along with silent movies—they made an excellent pair, and they married during Gregor's 1937 concert tour of the United States.

During their brief courtship, Gregor asked Jacqueline to play piano for him, and she begrudgingly acquiesced. Upon hearing her, he was incapable of hiding his disappointment over her lack of pianism after years of study. In her autobiography *Jump in the Waves*, Jacqueline recalled the humiliating occasion:

> [B]ack in Ferrières, [Gregor] listened to me play, then put an easy piece of music in front of me and asked me to accompany him. I looked at him. "I can't," I told him.
>
> Try anyhow," he said, and sat with his cello, waiting to play. I tried, I fumbled and stuttered on the piano. "Your rhythm," he said. "Count one, two, three, four." I couldn't sight-read, I couldn't keep time. I had practiced endless hours. The piano had been the entire focus of my drive to break out of three worlds which imprisoned me—my

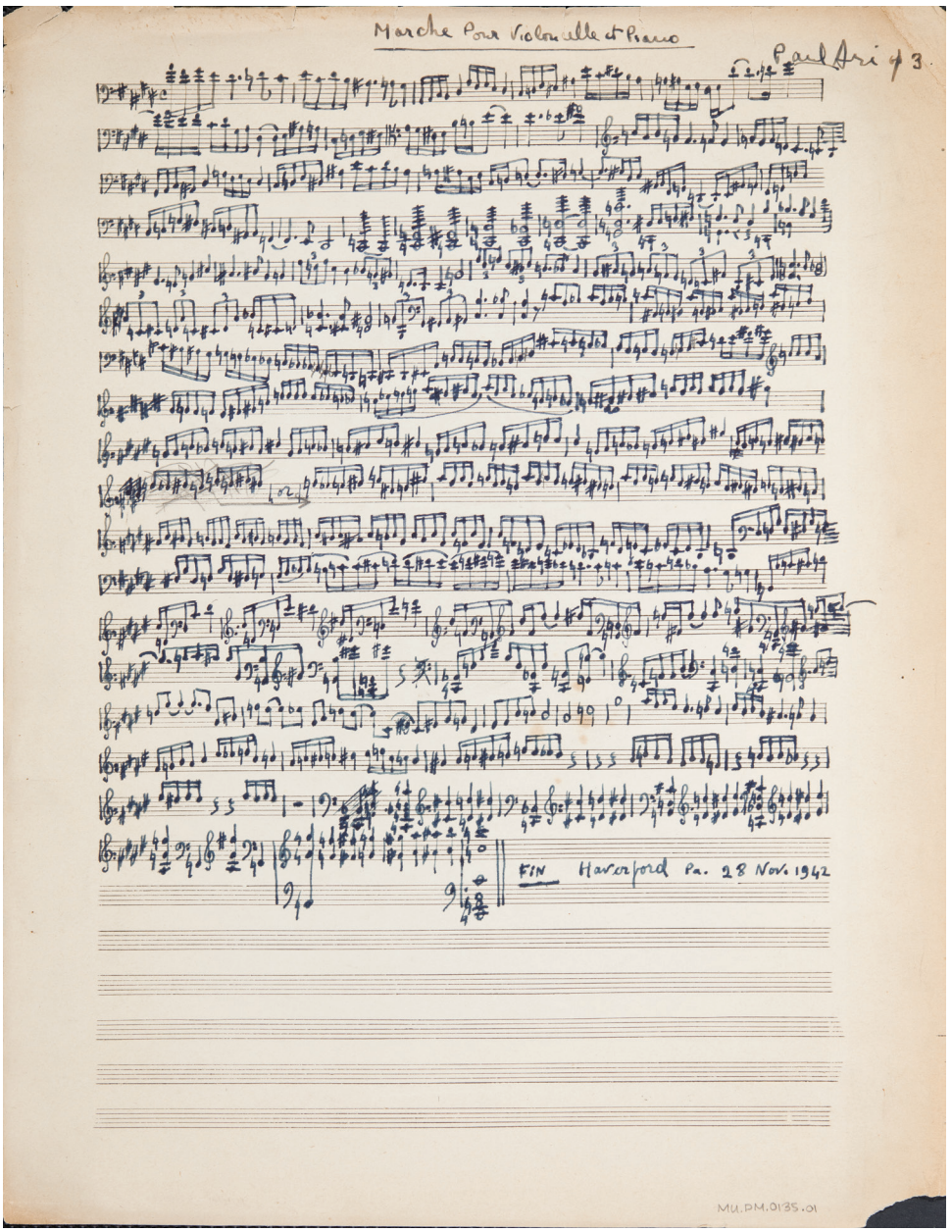
The author giving a tour of the exhibition "Sound Moves: Where Music Meets Chess" at the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis, MO. Photograph courtesy of The World Chess Hall of Fame.

childhood with Nanny, my parents' world, and my inner thundering world of despair. Several years of effort were crumbling to nothing. I was falling into a dark abyss.

"Your teacher is criminal," he finally said as I sat very silently, my arms hanging. But I knew it wasn't my teacher's fault if I wasn't capable. "She kept leading you on but never taught you music." He was appalled. But he was so deeply kind and enormously sensitive. He understood that I was crushed.[1]

Taking the occasion to turn Jacqueline's shameful revelation into an opportunity, Gregor kept Jacqueline's musical ambitions alive with the gift of a bassoon, a contemporary model by the renowned maker of wind instruments, Triebert France. "This is better suited for you than piano. It is the same register as the cello. There are less notes to play so there is no need to play as fast." No doubt the bassoon soon became a cherished symbol of their relationship. When they narrowly escaped France in 1939 on the day France declared war on Nazi Germany, a pregnant Jacqueline and Gregor left with nothing but their two-year-old daughter Jeptha, a suitcase, Gregor's cello, and the bassoon.

They fled to a house they had purchased in Elizabethtown, New York, a predominantly summer community near Lake Placid. Despite never having taken a lesson, Jacqueline taught herself to play the bassoon well enough to join an amateur orchestra as second chair, a position she held for two years. She also began playing chess with the violinist Louis Persinger, a former concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic and San Francisco Symphony, who likewise had a summer house in Elizabethtown. A master chess player who qualified to compete in the U.S. Chess Championship, Persinger regularly defeated Jacqueline, who had played all her life but never learned formal strategy. Persinger gave her a book on chess openings, and thus officially marked the beginning of her study of the game.



Paul Ari (Jacqueline Piatigorsky), Marche Op. 3b, Finale of the Cello Concerto No. 1, arr. for cello and piano (cello part only), 1942. Handwritten manuscript score. Courtesy of the Colburn School/Piatigorsky Archives.

Through her affluent family's extensive connections, Jacqueline already had established relationships with some of the world's leading musicians, even before meeting Gregor. One such family friend was the illustrious pianist Arthur Rubinstein, whom Gregor and Jascha Heifetz (arguably the world's greatest violinist at the time) would join in what an August 1949 article in *Life* magazine christened—and an eager RCA Records subsequently marketed as—the "Million Dollar Trio," based on their substantial collective earnings. In his autobiography *My Many Years*, Rubinstein recalled, "We went to visit [Gregor and Jacqueline in New York] at the Hotel Pierre, where they had a beautiful apartment. Great was my astonishment when Jacqueline entered their drawing room with a bassoon in her hand and, after greeting us, began to play a tune on it. 'In case the Rothschilds lose all their fortunes, I decided to make my living playing the bassoon. I found out that this is the instrument most in demand in America.' We laughed but had to admit that she already played rather well."[2]

In her youth, Jacqueline once mentioned to Rubinstein that she had attempted to compose a sonata, but he was dismissive of her efforts, and she abandoned the idea of composing music. Years later, after marrying Gregor, she took it up again, and found that she did possess some skill at composing and transcribing music. The Piatigorsky archives at the Colburn School in Los Angeles includes several of her compositions (many unfinished), and she wrote an encore under the pseudonym "Paul Ari" that her husband played on several occasions in recital. Asked whether she used a masculine pen name as a professional courtesy to her husband or due to the pervasive sexism in the music industry at the time, her son Joram reflected on his mother's many talents, including her musicianship, "She never spoke about it. In a way, that reflects her character—she did an amazing number of things, all well, but never put any emphasis on herself. I almost never heard her bring up past events or activities that most would have been proud to let others know. Yet, she was ambitious in her own way, an interesting combination of humility and inner drive."

But her husband's take on Jacqueline's compositional skills tells a different story, as he recounted in a *Los Angeles Times* profile on her in 1966:

> Years ago I lacked a contemporary piece for my recitals, so I complained to her that I needed something romantic in character and written well for the cello. I returned from a trip and very shyly she showed me a manuscript. I played it and I really loved the piece that she composed for me. I wanted to list her name on the program but she protested so enormously that it was listed under a nom de plume. I played it in France, England and New York and people were always asking, "Who is that composer with the French name?" And I could not tell them it was my wife. Even today the name would be recognized if I told you.[3]

Today, the bassoon is in the collection of Jacqueline and Gregor's grandson, the concert cellist Evan Drachman, along with one of Gregor's two Stradivarius cellos, the other currently on loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. While Gregor's instruments are amongst the rarest in the world and the more objectively valuable from a financial and musical standpoint, the bassoon tells a story of affection and perseverance that is unique to the Piatigorskys' own romantic history, and is therefore irreplaceable. While her musical

activities will rarely be listed alongside her more notable accomplishments as a chess player, tennis champion, and philanthropist, the World Chess Hall of Fame is proud and grateful to have the opportunity to shine a light on this previously unacknowledged facet of Jacqueline's ever-intriguing biography.

An associate professor of art history at Saint Louis University, Bradley Bailey has been writing and curating exhibitions about the intersection of chess and the arts for over two decades. He has curated numerous exhibitions for the World Chess Hall of Fame in St. Louis, including OUT OF THE BOX: Artists Play Chess *(2011),* Strategy by Design: Games by Michael Graves *(2014), and, with chief curator Shannon Bailey,* Sound Moves: Where Music Meets Chess *(2023). His primary area of research is the life and work of the artist Marcel Duchamp, and his writings have been seen widely in such publications as* The Burlington Magazine, *October, and, with coauthors Francis M. Naumann and Jennifer Shahade, the book* Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Chess.

Endnotes

1 Jacqueline Piatigorsky, *Jump in the Waves: A Memoir* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), pp. 122-23.
2 Arthur Rubinstein, *My Many Years* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 479.
3 Lynn Lilliston, "Queen of the Chess Devotees," *Los Angeles Times* (December 28, 1966), p. 51.