

ILSE FROMM-MICHAELS

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Ilse Fromm-Michaels was born in Hamburg on 30 December 1888 and showed musical talent at an early age. She studied music in Berlin, first at the Hochschule für Musik with Heinrich van Eyken for composition, and with Marie Bender for piano. In 1905, she began to study at the Sternsche Conservatory with Hans Pfitzner and James Kwast and completed her studies in 1913 with the conductor and composer Fritz Steinbach and pianist Carl Friedberg in Cologne.



In 1908, Fromm-Michaels began her career as a concert pianist, often playing her own works.

In 1917, she wrote her Piano Sonata Op 6 as well the predictable Waltz Round Op 7. The sonata is an accomplished work. The first movement has a loose structure with fine contrasts but much of it seems to be improvisational which may recall Mahler and, at times, sadly, it may suggest Schubert, as well as the style of a barcarolle. The slow movement has a funereal feel to it. The last movement is short, of moderate tempo with some bitonality and ends in F major.

The Waltz Round is six trite waltzes reminiscent of Schubert.

A better influence is found in her Variations in F sharp minor Op 9 which recalls Brahms the master, but, sadly, there is more than a hint of Scriabin until her personal style takes over

She married Hamburg judge Dr. Walter Michaels and they had a son Jost who became a well-known clarinettist. Her sonata has impressed some influential musicians including the conductor Arthur Nikisch who encouraged her to perform the enduring Piano Concerto no 3 by Rachmaninov. In the 1923-24 season she took part in the New Music concerts organised by H H Stuckenschmidt including a performance of Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire. She was not one of those shallow musicians who rubbished new music. Her opus 15 was a suite for cello dating from 1931 and the Passacaglia for piano Op16 in which she turned her back on inconsequential music and developed a serious style. The Passacaglia is an exceptional piece with sixteen variations beautifully structured and often powerful.

Then came Hitler. Her husband was forced to retire and her friend the painter Anita Ree committed suicide. Dr Michaels was also Jewish but survived the Nazi persecutions due to the special status of mixed marriages under the race laws. However he died in 1946.

The birth of the Nazi regime increased her serious style including her Marienpassion Op 18 completed in 1933 and the Symphony Op 19 of 1938. She wrote cadenzas for Mozart piano concertos.

After the Nuremberg Race Laws were instituted by the Nazis she had been banned from performing or publishing her compositions. She continued teaching music, and, after World War Disestablished the Hamburg First School of Music and Drama. In 1964 she was awarded the City of Hamburg Johannes Brahms medal. In 1973 she moved to Detmold to be near her son, and died there on 22 January 1986.

Selected works include:

- Variationen über ein eigenes Thema, op. 8 (1918/19)
- Vier Puppen, op. 4 (1908)
- Der Hampelmann
- Das Puppenmädchen
- Der Harlekin
- Acht Skizzen(1908) No. I-VIII
- Sonate für Klavier op. 6 (1917)
- Sehr langsam. Frei im Zeitmaß
- Lebhaft, aber nicht schnell
- Walzerreigen, op. 7 (1917)
- Passacaglia, op. 16 (1932)
- Langsamer Walzer (1950?)
- Der Maria Geburt, op. 9, no. 2 (Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn)
- Die Meise, op. 9, no. 5 (Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn)
- Engelsgesang, op. 9, no. 3 (Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn)
- Frau Nachtigall, op. 9, no. 1 (Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn)
- Wiegenlied einer alten frommen Magd, op. 9, no. 4 (Text: Des Knaben Wunderhorn)

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