

A NOTE FROM *Johnstone-Music*

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SPECIAL FEATURE on JOHANN BAPTISTE MARA (and his wife - you will see why!)

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JOHANN BAPTIST MARA was more widely known than his father Ignaz Mara, even though his father had written cello concertos, other solo cello pieces and some duets, but nothing of this has appeared to survive, indeed perhaps they were never even published during his lifetime.

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J.B.Mara was born on 20th July, 1744 in Berlin, where he father had moved to in 1742, becoming a member of the Royal Band. However, whilst his father was happily employed in the same post during more than 30 years his son had a very different temperament - a real 'wild boy'. Please read on!!

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Endowed with extraordinary musical talent, under the guidance of his father, he developed, during a proportionately short time, into such an excellent Cellist that Prince Henry of Prussia named him Chamber Musician. As he possessed a talent as a mimic and actor, he also assisted on stage on the theatrical performances which took place in the Castle of Rheinsberg (home of the Prince).

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Johann Baptist was increasingly active professionally in Berlin. In the year 1773 he married the celebrated singer, Gertrud Elisabeth Mara (née Elizabeth Schmeling), who, at that time, belonged to the Berlin Opera. It was a difficult marriage with the soprano, and things started to go wrong!

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He used the large sums paid for his wife's performances to gratify his passions, leading (understandably) to many disasters and to matrimonial turbulence. Not only that, he went further and ran into debts bit by bit, until finally his creditors were called together against him by the supreme court. He seemed to have also upset the royal family in some other way too, so he decided along with his wife to 'escape' secretly by night; however this panic flight of the married couple was stopped by the authorities in mid-track, and Mara condemned to imprisonment.

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His wife (bless her!) was able to intervene and get her husband freed, and they escaped (ah, this time successfully) once again in 1780 feeling that they would not now be treated at all impartially by the king. At that point the bohemian lifestyle took over. They passed through Vienna, later on to Paris, and finally arriving in London in 1784. During 1788-89 they travelled extensively in Italy, returned to London in 1790, back to Venice, and again to London in 1792. And so on.....his poor wife, unable to cope with the mad wandering life of her husband, finally decided to separate from him in 1799.

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JOHANN BAPTIST, now alone, therefore decided to return to Berlin where he hoped to resuscitate his career but - not surprisingly - by now had become unaccustomed to work and having neglected his cello playing for too long. Without any musical door opening as he had hoped he went over to Sondershausen, where Gerber (author of the well-known Musical Lexicon) heard him and befriended him, still seeing his potential, saying that he so finely played his own Adagio, no orchestra need be ashamed of taking onboard his playing;

"and if so," continues Gerber, "any one of his tones was out of tune, it was not the fault of his handling, but the bad and unequal stringing of his instrument. Perhaps his show pieces deserved less credit, which, however, appeared to be entirely in accordance with the taste of forty years ago. In other ways he conducted himself, while he was there, as a serious, accomplished, and thoroughly educated man, and gave not the slightest sign of inclination to intemperance. But he was in needy circumstances, and although his noble-minded wife had been frightfully disgusted at what she had suffered from him, yet in spite of this he was, from time to time, supplied by her with considerable sums of money."

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And yet, his new hoped-for career fell flat on its face. He was not able to repay his friend's courage and confidence in him - according to Gerber, Mara had a most unhappy end to his life. He moved to Holland, but once again to quote Gerber:

"his unhappy inclination for drink so gained the upper hand, that after having lost all sense of honour, he used to play for dancing, day and night, in sailors' inns and miserable beer-houses, until at last, in the summer of 1808, at Schiedam, near Rotterdam, death set him free from this wretched life."

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Common to the day when most cello virtuosi also composed there are some violoncello compositions of Mara; he is known to have written at least two Concertos, twelve Solos with Bass accompaniment, a Duet with Violin, and a Sonata with Bass. Nothing is published today.

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And the view from the “other half”:

Gertrud Elisabeth “Madame” Mara

Born: February 23, 1749, Kassel, Germany

Died: January 20, 1833, Livonia

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Gertrud Elisabeth (née Schmeling) Mara began her musical studies on the violin and her talent was quickly noted. At a young age, she was advised to study voice instead, as the violin was considered an unsuitable instrument for women. Mara flourished within her vocal studies, using the musical groundwork she laid as a violinist to help her singing. She studied with Johann Adam Hiller in Leipzig where she appeared in his well respected *große konzerte* series as did her vocal rival, Corona Schröter.

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Mara’s reputation continued to grow and she eventually found herself in an audition for Frederick the Great of Prussia. He gave her the most difficult aria he could find and was astonished when she sang it flawlessly upon first sight. He immediately offered her a lifetime contract with a large salary. She then met her future husband, Johann Baptist Mara, an unfavorable cellist in Frederick’s court. After their marriage, she began singing under the name “Madame Mara.” Eventually, her husband’s reputation tarnished her career up to such a point that Mara was dismissed from her lifetime contract with Frederick the Great.

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However, Mara found her greatest success singing in cities all over Europe, and her career as a concert and opera singer flourished. Described as her “finest effort,” Mara’s rendition of Handel’s *I Know My Redeemer Liveth* was her most celebrated performance, showcasing her brilliant technique. Primarily known for her singing, Mara also composed songs to use as vehicles for her own voice. Few of these songs remain today, but her reputation as a virtuosic German operatic soprano has not been forgotten.

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So here is the message: *“beer and money and cello don’t mix!”* - I hope you enjoyed that unusual real story!!

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‘documenting the cello’

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Please do see other original works for many different instruments and groupings, and also special transcriptions for cellists, and cellists with other instruments on the *Johnstone-Music* web page

Also both general musical and cello based articles, directories of famous historical cellists, and many other items of interest

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As far as *Johnstone-Music* is concerned you are welcome to publicly perform or record any work or piece found in the web; however you DO need to make mention of the name of the composer and the arranger on any printed information (hand programmes, disc covers etc.).

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To take advantage of this, try to write to us three weeks or more in advance with any information. Last-minute entries are certainly better than not writing at all - however, understandably, once we have past the calendar month of the event it is not usually possible to add old items to the calendar. It is very interesting for the promoters of *Johnstone-Music* to have knowledge of your activity - and so in return for your information you will be entitled to a free gift of a work/s for every diary addition you tell us about. To find out more about this, please visit the “*Cello Club*” section in the web!