

# Gender and music in Luxembourg – Looking back at 25 years of archival work and music mediation

By Danielle Roster

## Abstract

In 1996 and 1998, I came across music of female composers thought to be lost: first, orchestral and piano music, orchestral songs and the performance material of a feminist operetta by Lou Koster (1889-1973) and two years later, the entire musical estate of Helen Buchholtz (1877-1953).

In contrast to Lou Koster, Buchholtz had been completely forgotten at the time. In 1999, the heir to Buchholtz's estate decided to make the manuscripts, which he had kept in his cellar for around 50 years, available to the public. Thanks to his decision, I was able to found and manage the Helen Buchholtz Archive at the feminist documentation center CID | Fraen an Gender. The Lou Koster Archive was opened three years later. Collections on contemporary female composers from Luxembourg were added in the following years.

The aim of these new archives was not only to make the music accessible again, but also to research it, promote it through educational projects, edit it and have it performed again in concerts, as well as recorded on CDs. Since Buchholtz's music was completely forgotten and there were no recordings of it, the history of interpretation of her music was a blank slate. To bring the works back to life, I worked together with various interpreters: pianists, singers, and orchestras. Due to these projects, the two composers have become better known and their music is now being performed again in Luxembourg as well as abroad.

An important aspect of my work with the historical music was to bring it into dialogue with contemporary music. I therefore invited female composers to write new music inspired by Buchholtz and Koster. The commissioned compositions were premiered in concerts and most of them were recorded.

In 2022, a new research project titled MuGi.lu (Music and Gender in Luxembourg) was launched at the University of Luxembourg, in collaboration with MUGI (Musik und Gender im Internet, a joint research project of the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg and the Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt Weimar). Thus, the archival, research and music mediation work that has been carried out at the CID | Fraen an Gender for the last 25 years is now being continued at the University of Luxembourg in a new form: with the development of digital archives, an emphasis on oral history film interviews and the project's own homepage, which focuses on sources of different materiality (<https://mugi.lu>).

## Keywords

Music and Gender in Luxembourg, Helen Buchholtz, Lou Koster, Tatsiana Zelianko, Catherine Kontz, Albena Petrovic, Stevie Wishart

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**Music by female composers was often better known during their lifetime than in subsequent decades when it was rendered invisible, no longer played often for misogynistic reasons and gradually forgotten (Higgins, 2024; Citron, 1993). In recent years there has been renewed interest thanks to much groundwork which is presented here with regard to Luxembourg.**

Archival and mediation work relating to music and gender in Luxembourg was initiated by the documentation center (then CID Femmes, a feminist library and successor of the Mouvement de Libération des femmes), where I worked for thirty years.

This women's documentation centre was founded in March 1992 by a working group with the aim of steering the women's movement in Luxembourg in a new direction. A decisive factor was a crisis in the feminist movement that was not just limited to Luxembourg: From the end of the 1980s, there was a decline in membership of the militant feminist movement in many European countries, which ultimately led to a far-reaching reorganisation and repositioning (Kmec (ed.), 2012, chapter 3).

Another big challenge at the time was the apparent 'lack' of women's history. Academics who were interested in women's history found the source documents and literature on women in public archives and libraries to be extremely sparse. Since the late 1970s, women's archives and libraries had gradually been established in some cities and countries. The aims were now to expand this archival work with the help of state funding and to network internationally. The models for the CID femmes collection's focus in the field of music were already existing women's music archives and organisations at the time: Fondazione Adkins Chiti: Donne in Musica<sup>1</sup>, Internationaler Arbeitskreis Frau und Musik<sup>2</sup>, FrauenMusikForum FMF<sup>3</sup>, Stichting Vrouw en Muziek<sup>4</sup>, Europäisches Frauenmusikarchiv Düsseldorf<sup>5</sup>, Archivio Music, Libreria delle donne Firenze<sup>6</sup>.

Music archival work at CID | Fraen an Gender began with a chance

discovery in 1998: While researching the Luxembourgish composer Lou Koster, I came across the name of another female composer in a feminist Luxembourgish women's magazine entitled Die Luxemburgerin. Zeitschrift für die gesamten Fraueninteressen Luxemburgs (N.N., 1933, 1935, 1935). The name was Helen Buchholtz (1877-1953), and she had been completely forgotten over the years. I was only able to find a few of her printed songs in the Luxembourg National Library. But that was all: there was no biographical information and no information on any of her music related activity. In the few books and many articles on music in Luxembourg written in the 20th century, she was simply ignored. Only one article, an overview of the history of music in Luxembourg, mentioned her in a single sentence as a composer of orchestral works, which the author deemed praiseworthy (Meyers, 1949, p. 434).

### The Helen Buchholtz Archive

That same year I was invited to appear on a television program to talk about Lou Koster and during the

interview, I mentioned the name Helen Buchholtz.

A few days later I was contacted by an elderly gentleman, who had seen the program. He invited me to his home promising me some new information about Buchholtz: As it turned out, it was the composer's nephew, François Ettinger, who surprised me with a suitcase filled to the brim with music manuscripts - 250 of them, I later counted. He was very eager to help and gave me the suitcase to look through and to analyse the many scores in my own time. In further long conversations with Mr. Ettinger, I obtained biographical information, as well as sources and documents relating to Buchholtz's biography and her musical activities. A first research article summarized these findings (Roster, 1999).

Evidently, a piece can only be performed, researched, or edited if

scores of that piece are preserved in archives and those archives are accessible to the public. For many female composers, this is not the case and for a long time it wasn't the case for Helen Buchholtz. When Buchholtz's nephew decided that he wanted to permanently leave the estate to a public archive I had the opportunity, as music and culture representative at CID | Fraen an Gender, to set up our first manuscript archive. The archive was catalogued in 2000 and introduced with a series of well-attended concert-lectures. In the next years, further concerts, three CD recordings, research, and educational projects as well as book publications were to follow. TV coverage, radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine articles as well as University research work have since contributed to making the composer known in Luxembourg and beyond, thereby revealing a forgotten chapter in Luxembourg's music history.

Today, the Helen Buchholtz Archive contains the manuscripts of around 140 compositions, alongside further sketches, and unfinished drafts.

**“From the end of the 1980s, there was a decline in membership of the militant feminist movement in many European countries”**

addition to piano sonatas, character pieces and baroque dance movements for piano as well as orchestral and wind orchestra music and a few choral pieces, the song and ballad

repertoire constitutes a key area of her creation: Helen Buchholtz left behind 53 songs and ballads in German, Luxembourgish and French. She had published only 15 of them – as well as three pieces for choir. All her other compositions had been left unpublished. The archive also contains a biographical collection with original family documents.

Helen Buchholtz was born in 1877 in Esch/Alzette in the south of Luxembourg and came from a wealthy family – her father was a retailer of household goods and owner of a successful brewery – who encouraged her musical talent. As there was no music conservatory in Luxembourg at the time, she received

private music lessons and continued to study music autodidactically. Later she took occasional private lessons in composition, with Gustav Kahnt, Jean-Pierre Beicht and Fernand Mertens. Buchholtz lived in Wiesbaden, Germany from 1914 to 1924, where her compositions were played by the renowned Kurorchester Wiesbaden. During this time, she began publishing some of her own works. As heiress to a quarter of her father's brewery, she could afford the luxury of devoting herself entirely to composing. As far as we know, she neither performed in concerts nor taught music. She died in 1953, and while her works were being performed in the interwar period in Wiesbaden and Luxembourg, there was no audience for her music after the Second World War<sup>7</sup>, a time when women were once again confined to traditional gender roles and female artists received little recognition or acclaim for their work (Wagener, 1999). When she died, her descendants packed her scores up in sacks to be burnt as they were considered worthless by them. François Ettinger, who happened to be passing by, but had little connection to music himself, saved the trashbags from destruction and kept the scores of his 'favourite aunt', as he put it, as a memento, but their musical and historical value eluded him.<sup>8</sup>

### The Lou Koster Archive

Setting up this first archive on Helen Buchholtz highlighted the very practical consequences of what I had found before with regard to figures such as Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre, Alma Mahler-Schindler and many others (Roster, 1995): the lack of preservation of music by female composer, due to condescending disinterest or simple lack of knowledge. This was also true for Lou Koster (1889-1973), who was better known in Luxembourg, at least during her lifetime. Unlike the reclusive composer Buchholtz, she had been musically active in many areas: working as silent film musician, coffee house pianist, concert pianist, song accompanist, and orchestral violinist, she became director of a salon women's orchestra and taught the piano, for 46 years,

at the Luxembourg Conservatory of Music, founded in 1906. But after her death, similarly to Helen Buchholtz, only a very small part of her work was publicly accessible.

Lou Koster, thirteen years younger than Helen Buchholtz, was born in Luxembourg City in 1889 (Roster, 2019). The two composers later knew each other but had very different backgrounds. Lou Koster came from a less well-off and less conformist milieu: her father, born to a family of day labourers, was a railway manager and his political views placed him on the fringes of Luxembourg's predominantly Catholic society as he was a freethinker and committed socialist. Lou Koster shared her musical talent with her maternal grandfather, Franz Ferdinand Hübich from Silesia, who was the first bandmaster of the Luxembourg military band founded in 1842 and later also leader of the orchestra at the grand-ducal court. As there was no conservatory or music school in Luxembourg at the time, it was her grandfather and, after his death, her mother Emma, who taught her music. As a child, Lou Koster found a playful approach to composing. However, the first compositions that she recognized as such were written much later, around 1906 or 1908. As she was very shy, they were not published or performed publicly in concerts. Instead, she played them herself – almost anonymously – in places where composers were not mentioned by name: as a pianist in bars of renowned hotels and in silent film cinemas.

During and after the First World War, she gained in confidence and built herself a reputation as musician. She sought and found publishers for her piano compositions in Germany (Aurora) and Belgium (Maison Musicale Moderne). Immediately after the First World War, she joined the Luxembourgish campaign for women's suffrage, which was introduced in Luxembourg in 1919. She was also one of the first composers in her homeland to join the society SACEM France and passed an entrance exam in Paris. Her feminist operetta *An der Schwemm* (At the Swimming Pool) was based on a text of well-known author and feuilletonist Batty

Weber (see Millim, 2017). The first and so far only operetta by a Luxembourgish composer was premiered in 1922.

In the 1930s, Koster became known primarily through Radio Luxembourg – a transmitter station with a reach far within and beyond Europe – as her music was played in no less than 108 programs between 1934 and 1939. In addition to piano, orchestral and wind band music as well as choral music, Lou Koster wrote around 140 songs and in the late 1960s, shortly before her death, a major vocal work, *Der Geiger von Echternach* (The fiddler of Echternach), for soloists, choir and piano or orchestra, which is well known in Luxembourg to this day. She died in November 1973, leaving behind more than 300 compositions. Most of them have not yet been published.

When I first started researching her (Roster, 1997), the greater part of her scores as well as biographical documents were scattered across attics, offices, and basements of several private persons. Her orchestral music and the performance material of her operetta *An der Schwemm* were even considered lost at the time. I managed to locate both in a private storage facility of a musician. Not even the owner himself knew that he had the material in his possession. I felt that it was extremely important to collect the material and to create a publicly accessible archive. I didn't know at the time that, unlike the rather straight-forward establishment of the Helen Buchholtz archive, the creation of a Lou Koster archive would entail many complications and hurdles:

**Even though after initial discussions and negotiations the owners were willing to make their manuscripts and documents available to the public in one form or another – in the original or in form of a copy –, the reluctance of some of them to hand them over to a feminist archive was great and seemed insurmountable at the time.** CID | Fraen an Gender therefore initiated a collaboration with the Luxembourg National Library to jointly set up archives on Lou Koster.



Lou Koster.



The National Library was able to buy a large number of manuscripts in the possession of the singer Laurent Koster (no family ties), and was delighted to receive a comprehensive donation from tenor Venant Arend, who also decided much later, in 2016, to donate further Koster music autographs to CID | Fraen an Gender. Thanks to this collaboration between libraries, it was possible to collect most, if not all, of the music autographs. Some remain privately owned as part of a family archive to this day, but thanks to the former owner, the singer Béby Kohl-Thomes, copies could be made for the Lou Koster archive at CID | Fraen an Gender. The composer's nephew, Jean-Paul Koster, who also had numerous biographical documents in his possession, made them available for digitization by CID | Fraen an Gender. The National Library's Music Documentation Centre CEDOM was however severely understaffed at that moment, meaning that the cataloguing of their new Koster collection was bound to take a long time. An Excel list with detailed descriptions was only made publicly available in 2024 in the Luxembourgish library's online catalogue a-z.lu (Cedom, 2024). Before that, to allow researchers and musicians to access the collections as soon as possible, both partners agreed to copy the entire Koster collection held by the National Library and make it available to the public at the CID | Fraen an Gender in the form of copies as a temporary solution. In 2003, this collection was catalogued at CID | Fraen an Gender. As with the archive Helen Buchholtz, the documents were catalogued in a database named Elica, specially developed for libraries by the Centre Henry Tudor (today LIST), a system that was unfortunately later discontinued. They are now catalogued in Excel lists, which are available from CID | Fraen an Gender on request. The Lou Koster Archive was officially opened in December 2003, accompanied by the launch of a CD containing songs by Lou Koster and Helen Buchholtz, every song composed by Buchholtz and a selection of those by Lou Koster, all in world premiere recordings (Buchholtz & Koster, 2003).

Around 2012, the desire arose to critically reflect on the CID Fraen a

Gender's ten years of music archival work through an international collaboration. Together with the Universities of Oldenburg and Luxembourg and with other lecturers from music institutes at the Universities of Vienna, Salzburg, Cologne, Hanover and Neubrandenburg, the conference 'Women Composers in Luxembourg' was organised, focusing on four main topics: Luxembourg in Europe (national, cultural and gender identities); musical analysis and gender; the phenomenon of kitsch and, in particular, the topic 'archive - memory - gender' (see: Roster Unseld, 2014).

**The discussions on the fourth topic were particularly inspiring for our future archival and mediation work.** The fact that parts of Buchholtz's and Koster's biographical and musical estates had been preserved was more due to chance than anything else. Neither Buchholtz nor Koster endeavoured to 'prospectively' care for their own memory by giving sheet music and ego documents to public archives, either in their entirety or in specific selections, and thus, as Aleida Assmann puts it, sending themselves their 'message in a bottle' to posterity (Assmann, 2006, p. 39). Such stories of transmission as that of Koster and Buchholtz place the composer's 'rediscovery' – or according to Assmann, the 'retrospective memory', in which posterity, as the recipient of this 'message in a bottle', records something and saves it from being forgotten – under certain auspices and generate questions and consequences for the handling of the sources: Since the estates were not organised by Koster and Buchholtz themselves, it remains unclear how fragmentary what has been handed down should be considered and likewise which of the surviving musical manuscripts can be considered as authorized by the composer. Neither is clear how to deal with gaps in sources. Buchholtz clearly endeavoured to produce fair copies of her compositions, which make the distinction between drafts and final versions much easier for archivists and musicians. In contrast, Koster left behind several undated, and often musically slightly different versions of a work which are so sim-

ilar in their handwriting that it is not possible to identify which should be selected for performances or recordings as the "final version". Producing edited scores of her compositions is much more difficult than with Buchholtz. In addition to this, the fact that so few autobiographical or performance documents have survived increases the lack of orientation for the archivists.

Another difficulty is that of (re)inscribing women in cultural memory: How and where can this succeed in a musical culture in which most prestigious concert institutions to this day continue to construct a music history of "white male heroes" ('Heroenmusikgeschichte' by basing their programs on a musical canon generated in the 19th century (Citron, 1993)? How long will female composers continue to be performed mainly in niches, in a smaller, separate and underfunded sphere – in concerts for example presented by women's organisations?

### Letting music resound again

**The aim of these archive foundations was, as already indicated, not only to make the scores of Luxembourgish women composers accessible for the first time, but to develop ideas for projects that would ensure that their music was performed again.** These included research projects in collaboration with the universities of Oldenburg, Luxembourg and Salzburg, music-educational projects in collaboration with the Luxembourg Ministry of Education (Roster & Höhn, 2006) as well as conservatories and music schools, concert-lectures and over the course of time a total of nine CD-productions and a series of concerts.

There were already "role models" in this area too at the time: The founding of women's music archives in different European countries mentioned above meant that from the last quarter of the 20th century, the compositions finally brought to light were performed again at women's music festivals or concerts, sometimes even for the first time, after long periods of silence. To mention just a few of these festivals

HB 1B 18

Und um die Holzbank düfte der Flieder.  
(Anna Ritter) Helen Buchholz.

*Positiv, trübselig*

Wie-ist du den A- bens noch? Die M- me lung die

*(flüsternd)*

dich-ten Zwi-ge schüt- zend um uns wie- der, Hier Bach floss

gleich- tend um-heren Gän- vor- bei Und um die Holz- bank

düf- te- te der Fie- der. 8 10



Printed at Leipzig.

Und um die Holzbank.

held in Luxembourg's immediate neighbouring countries: the Frau und Musik Festival 1980 in Bonn and Cologne, the festival Komponistinnen gestern – heute in Heidelberg from 1985, the editions of the Internationales Komponistinnen-Festival in Kassel from 1987, the concerts of Musica Femina Munich from 1987, the concert series Komponistinnen und ihr Werk from 1990 in Kassel or the Festival Musiciennes à Ouessant in France, which has been taking place from 2001 to the present day. Additionally, women's music labels, such as Troubadisc, and music publishers, such as Furore Verlag, which is still very active today, were founded.

For concert- and CD-productions I worked with select musicians and orchestras interested in discovering this new repertoire: The sopranos Mady Bonert and later Gerlinde Sämman together with pianist Claude Weber were the first to explore the songs of Helen Buchholtz. French tenor Vincent Lièvre-Picard, together with the pianist Emmanuel Olivier, took on the repertoire of French songs by Koster. The pianist and composer Marco Kraus trawled through Buchholtz' extensive legacy of piano sonatas and piano pieces, and Jessica Chan also vigorously reinterpreted Koster's piano music. With the Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg and the Choeur National du Luxembourg, Koster's ballad *Der Geiger von Echternach* was performed and recorded in an orchestral version by Pierre Cao. I was also especially happy to work with an excellent German A Capella Ensemble: Singer Pur, with whom we produced a world premiere recording of the original piano version of Koster's *Der Geiger von Echternach*. Orchestre Estro Armonico also published a CD with Koster's orchestral music. Finally, with Opera Mobile and the Orchestre de Chambre du Luxembourg Koster's operetta *An der Schwemm* was brought to the stage again, 78 years later after the last performance.

As a result of the CD productions in particular, performers abroad also became aware of the composers and requested digital copies of the music for their own concert proj-

ects. Every year, we receive several enquiries from various countries. To give but one example: a waltz suite by Lou Koster was performed by the Mozarteumorchester under the direction of Leslie Sukanandarrajah at their 2022 New Year's Eve concert 'Alles Walzer' at the Großes Festspielhaus Salzburg (see: <https://events.at/event/festspielhaus-salzburg-silvesterkonzert>).

The concert and CD productions entailed much prior research and close cooperation with musicians. With Buchholtz, in contrast to composers with a history of live performances, recordings and critical reception, we lacked any points of reference. No historical recordings and only very few author-authorized publications of scores existed. Music had to be rehearsed and played primarily from the manuscripts, which sometimes raised difficult questions. As Peter Hecker, the artistic director of one of our CD recordings, put it, we were the ones who 'hammered in the first peg' of a new history of interpretation and were responsible for setting the initial course. Before concerts and CD recordings, we therefore often organized a series of house concerts where we discussed our questions about the music and its interpretation. The practice of playing from music manuscripts without necessarily having heard the pieces beforehand, was common for centuries, but has largely been lost in the age of widespread music printing and reproduced recording media.

The challenging process from their first review and rehearsing of the autographs of French songs by Lou Koster to their recording in the studio is described as follows by tenor Vincent Lièvre-Picard and pianist Emmanuel Olivier:

"A large heavy kraft envelope: that was our first contact with the complete collection of Lou Koster's French 'mélodies'. [...] This document contained a collection of 35 songs, with 'Ma douleur' still to be reconstructed by Nikolay Temniskov from existing records. Thirty-five pieces of music, mostly in manuscript form. The first, and not the least, task was to become familiar with the notation of the

composer. [...] Once this out of the way, we could concentrate on what was essential, namely giving life to the music of Lou Koster. [...] With this in mind, we worked a lot, taking and leaving songs, coming back to songs previously disregarded, trying to not always return to those that we liked best (in my view, the 'mélodies' to Paul Verlaine's poems should be part of the recitalist's repertoire), but also to look deeper into the songs that we did at first not like so much and which sometimes later surprised us with an almost symbolist strangeness. [...] Before going to the recording studio, we had performed in concerts, presented these melodies to an a priori reticent audience which did, however, very much like what we had brought to them, and this was for us a great encouragement. We listened to our concerts in sessions where we had to assess our own performance, an exercise which we found particularly difficult but revealing, helping us figure out how much of what we had wanted to put into these 'mélodies' really came through. [...] And now, here it is, this long-awaited disc! If we have hereby been pioneers and thus contributed towards enhancing the repertoire of French 'mélodies', we have achieved our goal and that makes us very happy." (Koster 2014, CD-booklet, pp. 17-18)

In her written review of her engagement with Buchholtz's music, Gerlinde Sämman also expresses the creative inspiration that can take place in a cross-disciplinary collaboration to explore unknown repertoire:

**"So, I started working with her music myself and, little by little, found my way into these occasionally mysterious compositions. After having familiarized myself with the music, the rehearsing could start. [...]"**

We had a great time, which involved a lot of research, getting to know the composer and her music, food and laughter. I even had a crash course in 'Lëtzebuergergesch' [...] and the patience and hard work paid off with me being able to prove myself in Ro' a Fridden, which is a lovely song, of which I liked the third stanza especially. [...] We thought and spoke often about Helen Buchholtz, and I imagined her with us, silently sitting on the sofa sipping a cup of tea



## “Such a dialogue is, of course, a one-way street”

and wondering about my way of pacing her music. All in all, though, I think that she would have enjoyed our interpretation of her songs.” (Buchholtz 2019, CD-booklet, pp-30-31)

In the case of music autographs that were difficult to decipher or had to be transposed into a different voice range, editions of scores had to be created. For the concert and the CD project with Gerlinde Sämman, the scores were also set in Braille. In different teams and for different concerts or CD productions, we edited around 70 scores over the years for both composers: Around 40 songs, 10 orchestral works, 16 piano pieces and finally a practical edition, or rather, a reconstruction from fragmentary surviving performance material, of the operetta *An der Schwemm* by Lou Koster. Luxembourg Music Publishers participated in one of our recording projects and produced an edition of the score of *Der Geiger von Echternach* in two different versions. We want these scores to be available to other musicians: Almost all can be ordered free of charge via MuGi.lu. The list with the edited scores of Buchholtz is already available on the Helen Buchholtz page at [mugi.lu](http://mugi.lu) (under the heading ‘works’), the one for Lou Koster is currently a work in progress and will be published soon.

### Contemporary Music and creative musical resonances

**Following the founding of historical music archives, a logical second step seemed to be the creation of collections on contemporary female composers born, living permanently in Luxembourg or**

having lived in Luxembourg only for a certain period. These include Elisabeth Flunger (AUT), Catherine Kontz (L), Elisabeth Naske (AUT), Albena Petrovic (BULG/L), Stevie Wishart (GB) and Tatsiana Zelianko (BYS/L). Further collections on Nigji Sanges or Núria Bonet were planned at the CID | Fraen an Gender but were not pursued when I joined the University of Luxembourg to continue to work there on MuGi.lu (see below). Here, too, it seemed important not only to archive the music, but also to help to bring it to public attention, especially as current statistics in different European countries repeatedly show that music by female composers, even in the field of contemporary music, is performed much less than that of male composers (Elles Women Composers, 2024; and for Luxembourg: Lorentz a.o., 2023). Ways to counter this tendency were the commissioning of compositions, organizing concerts and lectures, publishing articles, and developing educational materials and workshops for schools, conservatories or music schools, projects which are continued today by MuGi.lu.

**During these collaborations, I came up with the idea of bringing music by female composers from Luxembourg’s musical history into dialogue with contemporary music.** I did not envision to simply have works of different time periods performed at the same concert. In addition, this dialogue was to take place on a compositional level. Even if the musical forms and reference points of the individual projects differ from one another, this was and is a theme that was in the spirit of the times: in recent decades, works of New Music

have increasingly reacted artistically to ‘historical’ sounds, structures or compositions through adaptation, variation, transformation, quotation and homage (see for example: Clout & Saxer & Thorau, 2007).

At the time, I was inspired by the idea of ‘stille Botschaften’ (‘silent messages’), which I consider to be a type of communication between female composers of different times on an emotional, intellectual, and creative level. The term ‘bridge compositions’, denoting these commissions as bridges built between historical and contemporary female composers, was also an important term for me and became the working title of this project.

Such a dialogue is, of course, a one-way street: It is the contemporary composer who enters into dialogue by visiting the archive, viewing sources, listening to and reading scores of the historical composer. She enters musically “in resonance” (Rosa, 2016). The result is a new composition in her own creative language. From 2014 on, I commissioned compositions in the form of *Cartes Blanches* (roughly translatable with ‘blank checks’) from various composers who had an affinity for the concept. The only guideline was that the composers start the process by choosing an aspect or element of the music and/or biography of the historical composer in question as a ‘core idea or theme’ for their work.

In order to give an insight into these creative processes, using different approaches and various forms, I have described these four compositions

## ‘Bridge compositions’

In homage to Helen Buchholtz. For the double CD *Helen Buchholtz im Dialog mit zeitgenössischen Komponistinnen* (Buchholtz 2019), also documented on film (Schiltz 2018).

Catherine Kontz: ... **und um die Holzbank duftete der Flieder** (Anna Ritter) for voice and piano.

Albena Petrovic: **Illusions** (Marcel Noppeney) for voice and piano.

Stevie Wishart: **Strahlender Himmel** (Willy Goergen) for voice and piano.

Tatsiana Zelianko: **5 Colouristic Miniatures** (Eva von Collani) for voice and piano

In homage to Lou Koster. For the concert *Un très léger bruit d'ailes*, Vincent Lièvre-Picard, tenor, Emmanuel Olivier, piano. Neimënster, Luxembourg, 21 November 2014. Recorded by CNA, documented on film (Schiltz 2014).

Catherine Kontz: **Pantomime** (Paul Verlaine) for voice and piano.

Tatsiana Zelianko: **Garde to coeur encor** (Marcel Noppeney) for voice and piano.

Albena Petrovic: **Le piano** (Paul Verlaine) for voice and piano.

In homage to Lou Koster. For the Festival *Musiciennes à Ouessant*, Brittany, 2-5 August 2015. Recorded by CNA and documented on film (Schiltz 2017).

Albena Petrovic: **Postscriptum Suite dramatique** for wind quintet.

Tatsiana Zelianko **Postscriptum Soir d'été** for string quartet.

Catherine Kontz: **Postscriptum Traum** for violin, marimba, and accordion.

Catherine Kontz: **Le joueur de vièle** for violin and dancers.

Robin Pharo: **La lune blanche** for soprano and viola da gamba.

In homage to Frieda Salomon-Ehrlich and Helen Buchholtz. For a concert to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the last deportations from Cinqfontaines to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, Cinqfontaines, 15th April 2018.

Yvonne Timoianu: **Zum Gedenken** for cello solo.

Yvonne Timoiano: **Doudeg Dierfer** for cello solo.

In homage to Lena Toldi, a Russian immigrant in Luxembourg. For the Festival *Musiciennes à Ouessant*, Brittany, August 2018. Recorded by CNA and documented on film (Schiltz 2019).

Tatsiana Zelianko: **Le Temps de la cigale** for balalaika and piano.

In homage to Lou Koster. For the performance of the feminist operetta *An der Schwemm* by Lou Koster in January and February in 2024 Esch/Alzette and Ettelbruck.

Tatsiana Zelianko: **Prologue et Epilogue An der Schwemm**.

In homage to Josephine Schmoll. For the project *Soundgardening – waltz queens and marching women*, LUGA (Luxembourg Urban Garden), 8th of June 2025. Will be recorded by CNA and filmed by Kinoshi (Eric Lamèhne & Rae Lyn Lee).

Tatsiana Zelianko: **Rosenmär** for string quintet (two violins, alto, violoncello, double bass).

See also: In homage to Helen Buchholtz. For installation *Casa mia* by visual artist Doris Drescher, presented at Venice Biennale in 2001, with video: *Improvisations on Helen Buchholtz' Ave Maria* by Mady Bonert, Iglia Marinova and Claude Weber, <https://www.mudam.com/de/kunstsammlung/doris-drescher>

featured on the CD 'Helen Buchholtz im Dialog mit zeitgenössischen Komponistinnen' as follows:

**In her bridge composition ...und um die Holzbank duftet der Flie-der' Catherine Kontz wanted to explore the connection between musical and olfactory imagination: She cites the songs of the birds that would be found sitting in lilac bushes.**

The fragrant sprigs of lilac are rendered real in the smellscape as well as the soundscape of the piece: The audience smells the fragrance of lilacs as they hear the pianist cutting the branches, this is a reference to the Japanese art of Ikebana. Kontz dedicates the piece to her mother and the 'pinkish-purple tree' in her family's garden, in which the birds that are cited in the piece are yearly guests. In the piece, Kontz wants to expand auditory perception through an exploration of space, movement, and of other cognitive forms.

Albena Petrovic decided to set Marcel Noppeney's 'Illusions' to music anew and explained this: "The text was not just an inspiration for me, it supports the entire structure, development and dramaturgy of my piece. It was only after I had selected 'Illusions' that I found out that it was the only text<sup>9</sup> that had previously inspired two historical composers: Lou Koster and Helen Buchholtz. Now there are three songs by female composers that are based on this impressionist, dream-like, and graceful text." [...]

In her revision of 'Einsamer Weg' Tatsiana Zelianko broke down the text and rebuilt it into a five-part, miniature-like cycle. What especially interested her was the deep sadness and melancholia of the poem by Eva von Collani. In the soprano part she combines the classical Bel Canto singing with recitative. She does this in order to portray the text's progression from a melancholic immersion towards a state of emotional disarray. Zelianko locates the defining element of her five-part cycle's structure and mood in the sentence: "Sieh, meine Seele irrt durch die Nacht, die Gärten der Vergessenheit zu finden" [Look, my soul wanders through the night to find the gar-

dens of oblivion.] The virtuosic piano score in dialogue with the soprano voice further endows each miniature with its own sensibility and interpretation. Typical for the cycle is also the floating rhythm: by overlaying polyphonic textures in voice and piano the rhythmic pulse is lost. This floating wandering also defines the music of Buchholtz herself.

For Stevie Wishart it was not a specific text which Buchholtz had set to music that inspired her composition. In her composition 'Strahlender Himmel' she was concerned with a person close to Helen Buchholtz: the poet Willy Goergen (1867-1942), whose texts she had set to music and with whom she had a close friendship. A particularly puzzling object of Buchholtz's estate is a handwritten copy in Buchholtz's writing of a love letter, written in German and addressed to her, no mention of the sender's name. The sender could be Willy Goergen. Wishart was interested in this hypothetical, she reflects on this:

"So with this very special text [the love letter] I set about setting it to music — initially improvising on the piano looking at the words beside me. The score becomes increasingly intricate in a spontaneous spirit of heightening expressivity, something like a written-out improvisation. The performers either follow the composer's fully notated version or use it as the basis for extemporisation (as recorded by Gerlinde and Claude) while keeping to the integrity of the composed work — very much like a solo singer and accompanist might extemporise a Baroque recitative. The work is modal and uses only the white notes of the piano and looking back to pre-1800, considerations of tempo, articulation, phrasing, and dynamics are structurally determined and so depend on the performer's engagement with the work. Again harking back to earlier times the most complex aspects to the singer's part are composed using Renaissance and Baroque-like ornaments (liquescents, various trillos, rapid runs and glissandi) in order to avoid overcomplicated notation and to give expressive responsibility to the performer." (Buchholtz 2019, Booklet text, pp. 11-13, transl. from German).

Since these 'bridge compositions' are rather innovative, we sought to document the process of their creation. The filmmaker Anne Schiltz was commissioned by the Centre national de l'audiovisuel to direct a series of documentary films that bear witness to rehearsals, performances and productions (Schiltz 2014, 2015, 2018; see also: Kinoshi, 2025). To illustrate this with an example, in 2014, Anne Schiltz filmed the rehearsals and the creation of the piece 'Pantomime' by Catherine Kontz, set to a text by Paul Verlaine, which Lou Koster had used for a song composed in 1935. Catherine Kontz's new song is written for tenor voice, piano and three Dictaphones. The melody starts off as a tune reminiscent of Lou Koster's time, but then the three Dictaphones come into play, recording, and playing back the music, creating a layering of sounds that becomes more and more distorted. At the same time, the soloist undergoes a transformation on stage from singer to mime artist. Anne Schiltz says (in her part of our joint Lecture-Recital at the conference VOICES OF WOMEN on 10 October 2024):

"In these films, my objective is to capture not only the musical performance itself, but also the rehearsal process that precedes it. This includes interactions and discussions between the performers and composers involved. This approach allows the viewer to gain insight into the intentions of the composers, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of their creative process and the nature of their artistic vision."

**What remains to be seen after this 10-year collaboration with different composers is its impact: Has the engagement with historical music by female composers or aspects of women's history influenced their own self-image and work beyond the single commissioned composition?** Have their views on women's cultural-political issues eventually been sharpened and have their positions on feminism in society changed, and has this perhaps had an impact on their composing? MuGi.lu is planning a new portal on the topic of feminisms in music, and

2 Clar. (B)

2 Fag.

Contrafag.

6 Hörner 3-4 (F)

Pauken

Harfe

Singst.

Viol. I.

Viol. II.

16

Es muss doch zur Lieb-

Foto: Tord F Paulsen



we wish to include this assessment via interviews in the accompanying research project.

## MuGi.lu

**After 30 years of existence, CID | Fraen an Gender wished to re-orient itself and to focus henceforth on cultural policy (see: Lorentz a.o., 2023) instead of on cultural productions including classical and contemporary music by female composers. In order to continue the archival, research and music mediation work that had been built up over 25 years,**

it was therefore necessary to find a new location and develop a new project: In January 2022, MuGi.lu – Music and Gender in Luxembourg was launched at the University of Luxembourg, Department of Humanities and hosted by the Institute of History with additional funding from private foundations (Fondation Loutsch-Weydert, Fondation Sommer), the City of Luxembourg and a generous private donor.

This change led to an important shift of perspective. Whereas previously the focus was exclusively on female composers, the perspective has now been broadened on the music-related activities looked upon from a gender perspective, even if we continue research on female musicians as one of our central topics. Documentary sources are also no longer collected and made accessible in a physical location, as it was the case at the library and archives at CID | Fraen an Gender. Instead, they are digitized at the university, but generally remain in the private possession of the person who made them available for digitization, though we do encourage these persons to deposit their archives in public libraries and archives, as the music documentation centre Cedom of the National Library in Luxembourg, to allow for their long-term preservation.

In a presentation of the project at a conference on Literature and Music in Luxembourg in March 2024, Sonja Kmec described our goal and our approach to the topic in the following words:

“Our starting point is the observation that women are not only less

represented in certain fields, but that they are less visible even when they do exist, for structural reasons linked to networking but also to persistent clichés or to working and family care conditions that remain unequal for men and women. And this is true even more so for historical subjects. In that sense, it's a feminist critique, and the aim is to raise the profile of women musicians – composers, singers, pianists, and other performers. But it's not just about that. It's also about showing the impact that representations of gender, in other words the social and performative construction of gender, have had on their lives and on the image, we have of them”. (Kmec/Roster/Schiltz, 2025)

The MuGi.lu interdisciplinary team comprises three editors and coordinators: a historian (Sonja Kmec), a documentary filmmaker with a background in anthropology and a focus on oral history film interviews (Anne Schiltz) and a musicologist (Danielle Roster). We like to call our project the “little sister” of the German project MUGI, with which we work closely. MUGI, in this case, stands for Musik und Gender im Internet. The project launched by renowned musicologist Beatrix Borchard in 2004 is led by the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg (HfMT) and the Hochschule für Musik Franz Liszt Weimar, where Nina Noeske is responsible.

We work in collaboration with several researchers and institutions on the various pages of our website [mugi.lu](http://mugi.lu) which was launched with a first portal on Helen Buchholtz on 24 November 2022, at the Salon de Helen Buchholtz in Esch/Alzette, on the birthday as well in the birthplace of the composer. The Salon de Helen Buchholtz is a biannual festival directed by Claude Weber where various repertoires are being performed, from baroque music to 21st century creations and where the performers are encouraged to design their programs diversely and to dedicate a part of one of them to music by female composers.

MuGi.lu's objective is to uncover topics and archives that have not yet been accessible or researched and to create digital collections. We

enrich these collections by creating new content, for example by filming oral history interviews with musicians or by recording music by women composers. Additionally, MuGi.lu spearheads pedagogical projects and musical performances.

The different webpages display a carefully curated selection of documents. The complete archives, which are set up in the background of each new research topic, can also be accessed via request, via the CatDV asset management platform of the faculty, enabling musicians and researchers from around the globe to consult these documents, and fostering exchange between the academic community and musicians. To respect data protection and copyright issues, we collaborate with external partners, such as Luxorr and Sacem and received clearance from our DP Office and Ethic Review Panel.

**From 2022 to 2024, we have developed nine portals, each composed of about a dozen Categories.** These portals feature eight personalities from the Luxembourgish music scene, female composers and musicians, spanning from the late 19th century to the present day. In addition, one portal is dedicated to a musical work: Lou Koster's feminist operetta *An der Schwemm*. Most pages created to date are based at least partially on private archives belonging to the musicians themselves. In these cases, we have collaborated with the musicians to identify the most representative and pertinent documents from their archives. We have then set up a contract regarding document access and usage. However, we also reproduce a significant number of sources held by public institutions, such as the Centre national de l'audiovisuel, which has a substantial collection of historical recordings (for example a great number of studio recordings of Radio Luxembourg), the Centre national de littérature where we find for instance source material on the poets with whom ‘our’ composers collaborated or the already mentioned Cedom for a variety of autograph music scores and first prints, among others sources.

Pages on [mugi.lu](http://mugi.lu) are organized by materiality, usually grouped into

14 categories. We bring together a diverse range of materials, including audio and video documents, musical scores, photographs, letters and other written documents, personal items, press reviews, TV and radio programmes and more. The main page contains a biographical or factual text. In case of contemporary musicians, the biographical text is based on a longer interview. In some cases, we add a document with a sample of direct quotations from the interview next to the text. This approach of integrating different materials from various sources is a cornerstone of the MuGi.lu project. Given the diverse nature of our subjects, the sources we utilise in the elaboration of a portal are also highly varied. Consequently, the existing categories can be tailored to suit the specific personality or topic or documents we have for each page.

One of the key elements of MuGi.lu, as mentioned, is the conducting and filming of oral history interviews whenever it is possible to do so. In those interviews, we mostly collect autobiographical accounts. We carefully prepare those interviews by conducting thorough research into the subject's life and history and arranging preliminary meetings in advance of the recording. During the filming process, we do ask questions or provide prompts, but we also allow interviewees to speak freely and determine themselves what they wish to discuss. Selected excerpts from the interviews are then published on the [mugi.lu](http://mugi.lu) website, while

the full interview can be viewed via CatDV. This whole endeavour is still a work in progress. We're planning to subtitle all our videos in three languages, but we're not quite there yet.

We try also to make collaborations between musicians visible on our pages. This allows us to showcase a part of the network of each musician while also featuring a greater number of artists. For example, in her oral history interview, we specifically asked pianist Jeannette Braun-Giam-pellegrini to provide details of her collaboration with composer Lou Koster and filmed her in interaction with her former student, pianist Lynn Orazi.

Finally, with regard to the VOICES OF WOMEN project, I would like to mention that MuGi.lu has a particular interest in vocal music: Historically, women composers in Luxembourg, as elsewhere, wrote greater parts of their music primarily for the private and semi-public spheres. Furthermore, given that women, especially in the 19th century, were permitted to study singing and piano, but had little or no possibility to perform in orchestras or wind bands and certainly not to conduct them, female composers frequently produced primarily vocal music. This is evident in the MuGi.lu collections, which hold a substantial number of vocal compositions.

## Perspectives

Finally, I want to discuss MuGi.lu's future projects: For the next three years, during which funding at the University of Luxembourg is guaranteed, we are planning some more portals, rolling each of them out at an event combining conference and concert. One of them will be titled "Stepping outside gender roles," showcasing young singer-songwriters from Luxembourg who challenge traditional gender norms. This portal will include a documentary film by debuting director Céline Schlessler coached by an experienced team, Eric Lamhène and Rae Lyn Lee (Kinoshi). At the same time, a group of researchers from various disciplines at the university will analyse the texts and music of the portrayed musicians.

Recently, the University signed a convention with the municipality of Luxembourg for the project "Soundscapes of the City of Luxembourg". Within the framework of this project, we will develop a series of portals on topics such as: Entertainment music by 19th and 20th century female composers; gender and music education in municipal institutions in the 19th century; music patron Eugénie Pescatore-Duttreux and the creation of Luxembourg's conservatoire; gender and music during the Nazi-occupation; feminism in the music of contemporary composers. Musical events, workshops, composition commissions will accompany the creation of these pages.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1978, [https://www.donneinmusica.org/www/index\\_option\\_com\\_content\\_view\\_featured\\_Itemid\\_101\\_lang\\_it.html](https://www.donneinmusica.org/www/index_option_com_content_view_featured_Itemid_101_lang_it.html)

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1979, <https://www.archiv-frau-musik.de/verein-iak-frau-und-musik>

<sup>3</sup> Founded in 1982, today: ForumMusikDiversität <https://www.musicdiversity.ch/>

<sup>4</sup> 1987 gegründet <https://vrouwenmuziek.nl/wordpress/en/stichting-vrouw-en-muziek-english/>

<sup>5</sup> Founded in 1988 by Antje Olivier. The collection moved from Düsseldorf to Unna in 1992, where it was merged with the collection of conductor Elke Mascha-Blankenburg under the new name *International Women Composers' Library*, under the sponsorship of the city of Unna and the Detmold University of Music.

<sup>6</sup> Music archival work since 1990, <https://www.libreriadelledonne.it/puntodivista/dallarete/la-libreria-delle-donne-di-firenze-quarantanni-di-una-storia/>

<sup>7</sup> The research for press announcements and reviews was mainly carried out in the press database [eluxemburgensia.lu](http://eluxemburgensia.lu) of the Luxembourg National Library

<sup>8</sup> Information from personal conversations between the author and Buchholtz's nephew François Ettinger in 1998. See also: Deitz, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> Besides 'Illusions' by Marcel Noppeney one other text has been put to music by both Koster and Buchholtz: 'Rosenmär' by Nik Welter.