

Esther Abrami

Music Is
(also)
a Women's Affair



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Esther Abrami · Music Is (Also) a Women's Affair



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Music Is (Also) a Women's Affair

A Tribute from an Extraordinary
Musician to All Those Who Inspired Her

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To my parents, who have always supported me—with special mention to my mother, who taught me what *chutzpah* is.

It's a Yiddish word, and “having chutzpah” is often translated as having “nerve” or “audacity.” Personally, I would say it's a true concept that she instilled in me—sometimes even forced me to apply from a very young age. And shy as I was, I can tell you that I suffered for it.

So no, it's not about trampling over others to get ahead.

Having *chutzpah* means having the courage to assert yourself, not apologizing for existing, having enough boldness to seize opportunities—or, if they are slow to come, to make them happen. It's what the women musicians discussed in this book have tirelessly taught us through their adventures.

It's also what made me want to tell you their stories—
and my own.



Introduction

Do you have any idea how many times I've wanted to throw my violin out the window? Or, like rock stars do with their guitars at the end of a concert, smash it on the floor in a fit of rage? How many times I've shouted, screamed, kicked the walls, hurled the music stand to the ground, trampled on my scores... How many times I've sat there, curled up, crying with my violin in my hands, wondering what I was doing at ten o'clock at night, on a rainy Sunday, in the middle of nowhere in England, shut away alone in a practise room?... Countless times.

Because the violin is hard.

It demands many sacrifices—and many choices.

I devoted myself, body and soul, to this instrument for many years, with the aim of reaching a level of excellence.

The violin is an instrument that leaves its mark on you, in every sense of the term. I have had three imprints etched into the left side of my body—beneath my jaw, on my collarbone, and on my shoulder—since I was twelve. They are the traces left by the wood of my violin rubbing against my skin where I rest it.

They will never go away. In fact, it's how violinists recognise one another.

Learning the violin means learning iron discipline. It means waking up every morning, opening your instrument case—whether you feel like it or not—and

beginning with an A major scale, a finger dexterity exercise that sounds like a fire alarm, or playing an open string on repeat while watching the shape of your hand on the bow, trying to improve the sound.

Sometimes people ask me what I do for a living. I answer, “I’m a violinist,” and it’s as if my all-too-simple reply automatically prompts the next question: “Ah... and do you play any other instruments?”

But they don’t realise.

So yes, I play the piano—and honestly, these days I could probably pick up another instrument and manage a few notes without much trouble.

But being a violinist isn’t just “playing the violin”; it’s a calling, a boundless devotion interwoven with self-denial and passion. I mean the word *passion* in its older sense, from the Latin *passio*, which means *suffering*, but also *the state of someone who undergoes something*, who is acted upon. Because there is something uncontrollable about passion. It is an inner force, at once instinctive and emotional, that surges up irresistibly and can move mountains. “A violent movement of the soul,” as the French Academy defines it.

It requires an absolutely immense investment of energy and concentration, and a refusal to ever let go—to keep progressing, day by day, even if only by the smallest margin, even when you feel as though you’re standing still.

I regularly share glimpses of my practise sessions on social media: when I sing the notes to memorise a piece, when I rehearse a passage, or even when I lose patience after playing the same bar 56 times in a row. I think it helps audiences to better grasp the hundreds of hours

of work involved and the thousands of notes you have to learn in order to step onto the stage with confidence.

And it would be a mistake to think that this intense daily discipline stops once you've reached a professional level, or once you've earned your final diploma.

Jascha Heifetz, one of the greatest violinists who ever lived, used to say: "If I don't practise for a day, I know it; for two days, the critics know it; three days, the audience knows it."¹

So yes, the violin is hard—but it's beautiful; and above all, it's my whole life. And besides, I couldn't have given it up—I never had a plan B.

Sometimes I wonder what I would have done if it hadn't worked out.

Could I have been happy? I don't think so. I would have felt as though I were dying inside. It was so completely what I wanted to do with my life.

If I hadn't succeeded—if I hadn't been able to do this job, if I'd had to choose something else—then... I would truly have felt that my whole life was built on a second choice. Without exaggeration, I think I wouldn't have been able to listen to classical music anymore; I would have had to pretend it had never existed. There would have been no room for compromise.

I do, however, enjoy many things. I can read for hours; I love literature and poetry. I'm naturally drawn to art and culture, but also to history, whatever the period or place. I like taking care of animals, I'm athletic, nature inspires me... I had excellent grades in mathematics, and my decision not to pursue advanced maths at the age of 16 was a great disappointment to my teacher.

In the end, I could have chosen a thousand different plan Bs. Perhaps I was simply stubborn—that's possible.

But I believe that even if we're interested in many things, and manage to do them fairly well, there is always one that resonates with us more than others—and when we discover it, it's as if we discover ourselves.

At that point, it's no longer just "something we like to do." It's a calling.



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The world of music is full of great names – yet only a few of them belong to women.

In this book, violinist Esther Abrami sets out on a personal journey through the world of classical music. She brings to light composers, performers, and pioneers who have long been overlooked or forgotten, weaving together her own experiences with historical discoveries, unexpected stories, and a vivid perspective on the present.

Chapter by chapter, an alternative map of classical music begins to emerge – one in which women are not marginal figures, but central voices. Abrami writes about the artists who have inspired her, the obstacles she has faced, and the expectations and assumptions that shape a woman's path in music today. At its heart, the book asks what it means, now, to be a female musician.

Along the way, she opens up new ways of listening to both familiar and lesser-known works, drawing attention to a rich musical heritage that has too often remained in the shadows. Accompanied by a specially curated playlist, this book invites readers to listen differently, think more openly, and rediscover what they thought they knew.

A personal, engaging, and thought-provoking exploration of visibility and omission, tradition and change – showing just how much our understanding of music can grow when we begin to take women's voices seriously.

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