

From Austria to Opera: The Eccentric Life of Franziska Ascher-Nash

Allegra D. Banks

Abstract

Franziska “Franzi” Ascher-Nash (1910-1991) was a woman with a complex story unbeknownst to many. As she was born and raised in Vienna, Austria, she experienced the Anschluss in 1938 and had to flee to the United States. Her diaries are located in the McNairy Library right here at Millersville University, and my goal is to publish her legacy. As she is from Austria, her diaries are written in German. My job is to translate them to English and publish them. In the midst of my translations, I discovered her musical knowledge and that she also composed music. Women composers in the 1940s-50s often did not have their music published. I am searching for her sheet music so I can publish them posthumously, perform them, and shed light on the accomplishments of a woman in this time period. I also hope to present this at conferences devoted to women in music. The translation process involves many steps. I first type out her cursive writing, then I translate it to English. This involves a lot of guesswork and editing, as she often writes in shorthand. Online dictionaries and even machine translators are helpful tools to fill in the blanks. My musical background knowledge also plays a role. So far, I have discovered mentions of songs she wrote, such as a song called “Never Again.” She also wrote about her composing process and music theory. If I can find and publish her sheet music, people could perform it, expanding common repertoire.

Diaries are an excellent primary source for those who want to have an intimate glimpse into the daily life of someone from a different time period. Most students in the United States learn about the Diary of Anne Frank, for example. At the Archives and Special Collections, located on the eighth floor of the McNairy Library of Millersville University of Pennsylvania, there is a vast collection of artifacts, including diaries. One of these diaries belongs to Franziska “Franzi” Ascher-Nash (1910-1991), a Jewish refugee from Austria who fled to the United States of

America when Germany annexed Austria in 1938. As these entries are written in German, my job is to translate them to English, with the goal of publishing her works and giving her the recognition that she deserves.

The process of translation is a slow and meticulous (yet rewarding) process. The pages I am currently working on are from 1951, so the German is slightly different than the German I have learned from classes or from my study abroad experiences. In addition, she abbreviates many words. For example, she will often write the letters

“Anr.” as an abbreviation of “Anruf,” meaning “telephone call.” This takes a lot of trial and error when it comes to searching for the complete word. One tool I have discovered is an online bilingual dictionary (dict.cc n.d.), which will provide all possible words that begin with “anr.” if I follow the first few letters of the search term with an asterisk. This also works for endings if I begin the search with the asterisk.

After typing the original German entry into Word (an exact transcription followed by guesses as to what the abbreviated words are), I finally get to translate it to English. This is where I get to use not only my preexisting knowledge of German, but also mono- and bilingual dictionaries to fill in the blanks. Bilingual dictionaries are sources that give the English word next to the German word and vice versa. Monolingual dictionaries are German dictionaries that simply define the word using a German definition and no English. Both have their uses. If I am unsure if the word fits in the context of the diary, I will use the monolingual dictionary (Duden n.d) to get a sense of usage in context. In addition to Duden, there is a chronological dictionary (DWDS n.d.), that includes obsolete words and definitions, which can be very helpful for words that were used in the 1950s but are no longer used. I will even use Google Translate as a last resort. This is for sentences with very complex syntax (word order), and not for individual words.

Not only do I get to use my German knowledge, but I quickly discovered that my musical background was critical to translating this diary. Franzi was a musicologist and music critic who even wrote songs with her husband, Edgar Nash. She frequently references composers, performers, and music theory in her diary. I often put in bold text and brackets

explanations of the people and terms mentioned. For example, she mentions letters from Morton Gould, and I add: [American composer 1913-1996]. Another example would be her mentions of counterpoint, which I explain briefly as the technique used to write a fugue.

Although she never names him in the diary, it can be assumed that the man about whom she constantly wrote is her husband. She occasionally references banking terms, and according to her German Wikipedia page, her husband was a banker (“Franzi Ascher-Nash” 2020). The bulk of her entries mention the songwriting process with this man as her songwriting partner. It can thus be concluded that Edgar Nash and Franzi Ascher-Nash have written songs and music, and I have reason to believe that there may be manuscripts and lyric sheets in her collection at the Archives and Special Collections. My dream is to find, edit, publish, and even perform their music, as these two people are not well-known, and they deserve recognition.

I especially want to publish Franzi’s music because I firmly believe that women composers need to be programmed more often. There are international conferences about music by women, yet according to a survey “of the 22 largest American orchestras, women composers accounted for only 1.8 percent of the total pieces performed in the 2014-2015 concert season” (O’Bannon 2018).

Publishing Franzi’s music and even her diary would add to the growing list of music by women. Since this particular diary was written in 1951 when women often could not publish music, I think the best way to honor this person posthumously would be to publish her legacy.

References

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