

DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS

BY NICK GREEN | DIRECTED BY SAMANTHA MARTINSON

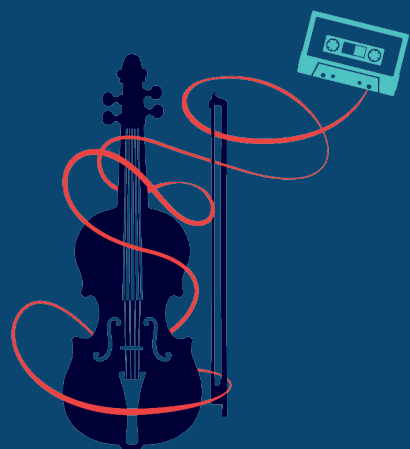
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ENRICHMENT GUIDE

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Please note that this guide contains not only important background and context, but also discussion of plot elements that could be considered “spoilers.”



Nick Green.
Photo by Colton Curtis.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Nick Green is a Dora Award-winning playwright from Toronto. After premiering at the Stratford Festival of Canada in 2023, his play *CASEY AND DIANA*, which will be playing at American Players Theatre later this year, has had productions in 13 cities across Canada and the United States. Other credits include *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS* (Crow’s Theatre, Next Stage Theater); *IN REAL LIFE* (book, Theatre Sheridan); *EVERY DAY SHE ROSE* (Nightwood Theatre, Black Theatre Workshop, ZeeZee Theatre); *DR. SILVER* (book, South Coast Repertory - Pacific Playwrights); *BODY POLITIC* (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, winner of Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play); and *POOF! THE MUSICAL* (book, Capitol Theatre).

Fun Fact!

Nick established an online artists community, The Social Distancing Festival (socialdistancingfestival.com) as a response to counteract the impact on the arts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online, he wrote:

Personally, a production of a new musical of mine was cancelled on March, 13, 2020. Yeah. Friday the 13th. Like, come on right? It’s such a weird mix of feelings. Yes it was absolutely the right decision. 100%. But so, so, SO disappointing. That production was years in the making, and my co-creator and artistic team had a lot invested. We didn’t just lose a chance to develop the work, but also to share it, celebrate it, and potentially connect with further opportunities. Instead, I went home, where I was alone, disappointed and facing a whole lot of free time. I have three main goals with [the social distancing festival]:

- 1) It helps to get some of the great work that you’ve done out to the world, and projects that were cancelled get the word of mouth that they missed out on;*
- 2) We are able to keep feeling a sense of artistic community, even from our living rooms, and*
- 3) Artists are able to continue to engage with their projects by making videos, sharing work, and celebrating the work of others.*

IMPORTANT FEMALE VIOLINISTS

DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS mentions several highly-accomplished woman violinists as it explores the legacies and examples passed along from women of the past to those of the future. The women listed below, presented in chronological order, reflect a long historical lineage; the heroine of the play, Margaret, upon the end of her career, is very conscious of her own place and prominence in this lineage.



Wilma Norman-Neruda (1838-1911), born in Moravia, came from a family of distinguished violinists and played the violin before she walked. She had a wide and stellar career throughout Europe as a performer and teacher. She was a pioneer at a time when women violinists were a rarity in the world of symphony orchestras. She was among the first to enter a field dominated by men.

Wilma Norman-Neruda. Alexander Bassano via Wikimedia Commons.

Helene Jourdan-Morhange (1888-1961) was a virtuoso French violinist whose life was filled with many personal tragedies and many mutually inspirational artistic relationships with famous French composers. She had a close personal and musical relationship with the composer Maurice Ravel, to whom she was a muse and inspiration. Their intense collaboration was a platonic one. Ravel dedicated one of his sonatas to her, but she was unable to premiere it due to worsening chronic pain. This pain, which may have been arthritis, could not be diagnosed by doctors of the time and impaired her ability to perform.



Hélène Jourdan-Morhange (left), Madeleine Grey, Germaine Malançon and Maurice Ravel. Bibliothèque nationale de France via Wikimedia Commons.



Anna da Silva Chen (1996-present) is a highly regarded and award-winning Australian concert violinist. She is a member of the Australian Chamber Orchestra and a leader/founder of the Alma Moodie Quartet, which embraces complex and sometimes neglected works across many historical periods.

Anna da Silva Chen. Via Steel City Strings.

Maud Powell (1868-1920) was born in Peru, Illinois, and at age nine, toured Wisconsin and other Midwestern states with the Chicago Ladies' Quartet. She trained in France and Germany and performed with major world orchestras and her own quartet until her death. She was the first violinist recorded by the Victor Talking Machine Company.



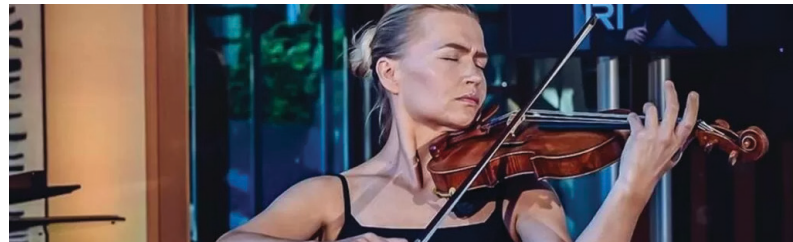
Maud Powell. George Grantham Bain Collection (Library of Congress) via Wikimedia Commons.

Erica Morini (1904-1995), a virtuoso violinist, was born in Vienna and made her Violin debut at age five at a birthday party for Emperor Franz Joseph. Following the Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938, Morini, who was Jewish, settled in New York. She had made her Carnegie Hall debut there 17 years earlier. After that acclaimed debut, she was presented with a violin owned by Maud Powell, who had died the previous year. Powell had specified in her will that the violin was to go to the "next great female violinist."



Erica Morini. Via Wikimedia Commons.

Mari Samuelsen (1984-present), is a Norwegian violinist who has worked regularly with the contemporary composer Max Richter (also mentioned in the play) and performed classical and contemporary works in leading venues around the world. Her YouTube video of "Summer" from Vivaldi's The Four Seasons has amassed more than 40 million views.



Mari Samuelsen. Via Phamox Music.

In the play, Margaret hopes to be remembered for her own contribution to music history.

Some notable men from the world of music are also mentioned in the play:



Isaac Stern (1920-2001), born in Ukraine, moved to the U.S. at age one, and was one of the premier violinists of the 20th century. He played a key role in saving New York City's Carnegie Hall from demolition in 1960 and helped establish the National Endowment for the Arts.

Isaac Stern. PBS via Wikimedia Commons.

Anthony Tommasini (1948-present) was the chief classical music critic for The New York Times from 2000 to 2021. He wrote about orchestras, opera and diverse styles of contemporary music. He is a pianist and former music teacher with a doctorate of musical arts.



Anthony Tommasini. Via Tony Cencicola.

MUSICAL CONTEXT

Music in the Play

DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS begins and ends with excerpts of two pieces of violin music. Here is some background on these pieces and how they relate to the play:

The music used at the beginning of the play, "Spring 1," is a recomposition by the prominent contemporary composer Max Richter of the "Spring" portion of Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*. Richter often combines new forms of media and contemporary influences while drawing from the classics. He is wildly popular, with more than 4 million listeners on Spotify. "Spring 1" is his top work on Spotify and will be familiar to fans of the TV show *Bridgerton*. This choice of music sets the play in the present while still evoking classical music heritage which is a major theme of the play.

The music played in the closing section of the play, the "Vitali Chaconne," is a beautiful, charged and compelling virtuoso violin piece. It is referred to repeatedly through the play vis-à-vis a famous, acclaimed recorded performance from the lead character, the star violinist Margaret. The musical form of a chaconne, which was used by Johann Sebastian Bach and others in the Baroque period, features repeated harmonic themes together with opportunities for variation and decoration by the musician.

The Vitali Chaconne is attributed to the Italian composer Antonio Vitali, but there is no certainty as to its exact roots, as it wasn't published until 1867. In the play, there is a back-and-forth as to whether Margaret openly takes pride in, acknowledges the greatness of, or even listens to, her famous recording of the piece. There is also back-and-forth about Margaret's struggles, tribulations, conflicts with people, diva persona and sudden, recent retirement announcement. As she finally opens up to Helen, the interviewer writing a story about Margaret's life, Margaret's recounting takes on a form, structure and rhythm not unlike the Vitali Chaconne. The subsequent playing of Margaret's recording focuses attention on what is and what should be Margaret's legacy. Should it be her personal ways and image, or should it be her music?

Both pieces of music referenced above share an evolutionary history. Both have gone through change and adjustment through time. In the play, there is reference to an adjustment in another piece of music by Margaret – an adjustment at her instigation which is said to have triggered an epic conflict with her long-time conductor-collaborator regarding whose vision should prevail.

Women in Classical Music

In the play, we gather that Margaret has overcome many types of challenges to have the career she's had. There are hints of abuse and a family background of financial insecurity, as well as double standards when she revolts or speaks up. We also hear stories of how the women prodigies and virtuosos who came before her were mistreated.

And yet, we see that she HAS succeeded to a rare level of artistry and prominence. And we see women occupying chairs and often appearing as guest soloists at symphony orchestra concerts. So, how are we left to judge her experience? Might Margaret deserve tolerance for the strong temperament which got her haughty nickname? These are questions you may be left with after seeing this play, and one answer could be that the threshold for *judging* another person should be high. But some historical facts can also be useful:

Less than a century ago, women performing in symphony orchestras were rare. It has been written that the piano virtuoso Clara Schumann (1819-1896), the wife and soulmate of composer Robert Schumann and a close communicant of the composer Johannes Brahms, deserves a lot of credit for both men's achievements, and that she might have made different choices in her artistic pursuits and her career if she had been alive in a later era.

One cause for increased representation of women in orchestra positions was the advent of "blind auditions," in which the player's race and sex were hidden. The Boston Symphony instituted this practice in 1952. The fact that this became a widespread practice is a testament to the way that intentional or unintentional bias affected audition processes previously. Still, a 2023 report showed only about 10 percent of symphonic music directors were women. Also, as in other parts of the workforce, sexual harassment has gained increased attention in symphonic orchestras. Investigations relating to harassment of women led to dismissals at the New York Philharmonic and Cleveland Orchestra in recent years.

So, talk of glass ceilings, coercion, and a male dominated culture is merited.

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

Director Samantha Martinson is making her Next Act debut as the director of *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*. She has taken a long journey to see this play produced on our stage - including a trip to Canada to meet playwright Nick Green and watch a production of the play! We sat down with Samantha to learn more about what drew her to this compelling drama.



Samantha Martinson.

What brought you to this play?

I directed a staged reading of *CASEY AND DIANA* at American Players Theatre, which is by Nick Green as well. After that reading, I became really intrigued by his writing. I followed him on social media, and then I went and found all the theatres that were producing his work, and I started following them as well. I think that one of the best ways to see what new playwrights are up to is to follow them online.

He had shared a theatre's season announcement with *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*. And I was like, "what is that play? That sounds really intriguing." I started searching online to see if I could buy it, and I couldn't find it. I had Nick's email from the reading because we were in conversation about *CASEY AND DIANA*, and I sent him a note and I said, "hey, I saw that this is being premiered. I'm really interested, and I can't find it anywhere." And he was like, "actually, it's not published. Here, take a look at it and let me know what you think - I'm not sold on the ending yet."

He sent it over to me; I read it and

sent back thoughts, and I was like, "you know, I really think that there's a theatre company that would be really great for this. I think I have the perfect person I would want to have a conversation with to see if this is a play they would want to do - Laura Gordon." I dropped Laura a line and had her read it, and she said, "I really like it," and it went from there.

Then, the second draft came in, and the ending was different. It was really cool to see the conversation and feedback, and how the ending changed.

What made you think of Laura for this play?

When you read the play, her voice comes to mind. She is one of the top-tier actors in the area and, I would say, a master of her craft. [She's] someone who can handle the nuance and understands the depth of the character.

One of the things that I've been mulling over with this play is that it's simplistic in its construction, and it's complex in its language. The conceit is a dinner [with] three people. The language and the dialogue around it, and the complexity of conversation that is interwoven, that changes every other sentence, the way they are masterminding this conversation is incredible.

Is it reminiscent of Edward Albee's *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* in that way?

When I was talking about it one time, I referred to it as "*VIRGINIA WOOLF* without the men." *laughs*

I do think that, actually, [Margaret's] husband is a really significant part of it, and he's present,

but his presence isn't the key feature of this story. I think the relationship is really complex and has a lot of unanswered questions, and what I love is that Nick Green doesn't give you the answers, even in the ending. That's not what is most important; what's most important is the conversation around the decisions that are being made, and what decisions you would make, and what is happening in the moment. It leaves you wondering what happens.

What was it like going to Canada to see the play?

I feel really lucky that Next Act was able to offset some of the cost for going to see the play in Toronto. One of the things that was really cool about it is that it hasn't been done anywhere else outside of Canada. The opportunity to see the play and hear it was even more powerful.

You can only gather so much from reading a piece; it's meant to be lived. To see it lived, in action, gives you different insight. I think that's why at the first read[through], you always have this moment where you're like, "whoosh." All of a sudden, there become seven million new layers that you'd never heard before because you hadn't had this team in the room together until now.

[Nick and I] met for dinner before the show. We had a chance to talk about art, we had a chance to talk



Crow's Theatre, Toronto. Photo by Samantha Martinson.

about casting and about things that he saw in the script that he felt were really significant. We really focused our time on Helen, actually, and understanding her character and the nuance of her. It's a really challenging role for someone in their early career to step into, to be toe-to-toe with such a caliber of talent and skillset that just comes with age. I say that as a younger director, too; things come with age. But something that comes with youth, which you see in Helen, is this elasticity to bend and shape. She's not stuck in one way of viewing the world; she is morphing between these conversations.

What is your approach to directing?

I think with directing, you're creating space in the room to have conversation: regardless of your experience, your opinions and understanding of your character are validated and explored, and I stay open to the discovery that maybe we are missing something. I try to approach the work by asking: how can I show up and have conversations with Laura, Andrew and Mai, and then take all of those three thoughts, meld them together and extrapolate what's significant?

Honestly, I am constantly learning and being surprised. I never claim to be the expert in the room ever, because I think that can be our greatest downfall. I should know the most at the start, and by the end, I should know the least.

What is your relationship to Milwaukee?

I didn't grow up as a child [in Milwaukee], but I went to school at Marquette, and I left and lived on the east coast for a minute, and I came back for a gig at First Stage, and then I stuck around. Things just fell into place for me. I have been in the arts world for the past 15 years in Milwaukee, though I've recently relocated to Minneapolis with my partner.

Coming back to Milwaukee in this capacity feels special. It also feels really special to be working with Laura on this project at Next Act. Next Act is a beautiful theatre company that takes risks, but also brings audiences along the journey



Mai Abe, Laura Gordon, Andrew May, Laura Kloser and Samantha Martinson in rehearsal for DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS. Photo by A.J. Magoon.

of feeling safe enough to take on those risks with them. And also making theatre incredibly accessible – you can afford to go and see a production at Next Act no matter where you are [in life].

There are some really hard conversations that happen within *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, but they happen so softly that all of a sudden, you didn't realize that's what was happening. Next Act is the perfect incubator for this type of theatre. I feel really grateful that this is the piece that I get to work on for the first time at Next Act.

What do you hope the audience takes away from this play?

[Samantha shared part of the email she wrote to Nick Green after first reading the script:]

"It's taken me a minute to get back to you about *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, mostly because it landed so deeply with me. I've been sitting with the idea of legacy and how it gets created, but even more, I've been thinking about, as a woman, how we reconcile the need to create art with the sacrifices required of us to do so. I'm really interested in the two women: Helen, being on the precipice of stepping into the industry, all to be pushed to the question, "is the truth worth exploiting? What truth do you have the power to shape, and what is our responsibility as women to one another?" This all pulls me back to the question about being compelled

to create and our deep connection to passion and identity."

Those things have never left me. What I would love for the audience to walk away with or to think about: again, this play gives us more questions than answers. I hope they can engage in a conversation about truth and power and responsibility; the way that women show up in the arts industry and what obligations we feel are required of us. I think all of those things are circling around the idea of legacy and how we leave the world. What is our responsibility to other humans? Those questions can't be answered in 90 minutes, so I hope that people can continue that conversation.

I think a good piece of theatre comes back to you months later. I hope that audiences don't have the answers when they walk away, but they continue to explore and understand, and think about the world a little differently.

ADDITIONAL CONTEXT

What's in a Nickname?

In the play, Margaret dislikes the use of a nickname given to her – the Duchess. It's for the audience to consider whether Margaret's disparaging, haughty nickname is deserved, appropriate or fair. Or indeed whether it matters to her legacy.

Some nicknames that have been applied to real-world classical musicians:

- Wilma Norman-Neruda – Queen of Violinists
- French Singer Edith Piaf – The Little Sparrow
- Conductor Sir Georg Solti – The Screaming Skull (for his facial expressions while conducting)
- Composer Franz Schubert – The Mushroom
- Composer Johannes Brahms – The Young Eagle
- Opera Star Beverly Sills – Bubbles
- Antonio Vivaldi – The Red Priest
- Clara Schumann – The Queen of the Piano or The Grand Dame of Music

Fugue in C# by Johann Sebastian Bach.
Bibliothèque nationale de France
via Wikimedia Commons.

New York Philharmonic. Ambassador
Nicholas Burns via Wikimedia Commons.

Arthritis

While arthritis is a common reality for many musicians, there are few recorded instances of major female violinists publicly naming it as the reason they stepped away from performing. More often, artists describe "injury," "pain" or simply the physical limits of aging, rather than specifying a diagnosis. In the context of *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*, that absence is telling. It reflects a reality where a performer's identity is so tied to their ability that naming a specific physical decline, especially something like arthritis, isn't always something artists choose to do publicly. Margaret's experience to disclose her arthritis, then, feels almost confession that is rarely spoken plainly.

The famous French singer Edith Piaf suffered from rheumatoid arthritis as well as other physical ailments, yet she continued to perform through the pain. She performed even in despite of the fact that there were fewer methods for managing arthritis pain during her lifetime than there are today. While the arthritis did not relate directly to her instrument, the voice, it was still a burden to her. It has been said the emotion she conveyed in her performances was, to a great degree, a kind of expression of her physical pain. Piaf died at age 47 in 1963.

The singer-dancer Paula Abdul also has rheumatoid arthritis. She appeared in a commercial for an arthritis gel in 2020 with a depiction of her then-current dancing compared to her dancing in 1989.

A prominent Los Angeles based violinist, Lisa Sutton, is an arthritis sufferer who had multiple finger joint surgeries which have allowed her to continue to playing into her 60's.

A PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION

THE PERSON OR THE ART?

*Mai Abe and Laura Gordon in rehearsal for DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS.
Photo by A.J. Magoon.*



As alluded to on the previous page, there is a question pervading our society (which is also explored in *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*) as to whether an artist's imperfections as a *person* diminish or at all relate to their legacy for their *work*.

There are many famous examples of various types of artists who have been difficult to work with, or even abusive to co-workers, subordinates or other people in their lives. Some prominent individuals in the world of music have been accused of sexual abuse and have had their reputations and careers reevaluated as a result.

Very recently, a different type of artist, the widely acclaimed chef Rene Redzepi, famous for his Copenhagen restaurant Noma, has been the subject of publicity about alleged extreme mistreatment of employees. Yet his culinary creations remain nearly universally acclaimed.

If the worst views of Margaret are true – and there is no indication that they are – does that matter when one is considering her legacy as a musician?

In a recent interview with CBS, Itzhak Perlman was asked how he'd like to be remembered. His answer: "That I did the best I could as a musician and just as a human being."

Another type of artist, the poet T.S. Eliot, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948, wrote a widely read essay entitled "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in which he placed surpassingly excellent poetry written in different periods of time as part of the body of excellent poetry that came before it. He also suggested that the work itself should be devoid of and unrelated to the creator's own personality. Yet he concluded: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things."

A VIRTUOSIC INSTRUMENT WOMEN AND THE VIOLIN

FROM LAURA KLOSER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Laura Gordon in rehearsal for *DINNER WITH THE DUCHESS*.
Photo by A.J. Magoon.



Before the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the violin was indeed a “male-dominated instrument” (Nagel-Frazel). Women were encouraged to study piano, harp, guitar, or voice as a domestic accomplishment “intended to attract suitors” (Powell, 21) and occupy their time, but they were not encouraged to perform publicly. As the violin and its repertoire were primarily featured in orchestral and solo performance, the violin was “intrinsically linked with the public, virtuoso performer in a way that the piano [was] not, and consequently remained problematic for female players” (Powell, 37).

Other objections to women learning the violin included the unfeminine posture of violin performance, including the “clamping down of the chin, rapid arm movements, and the standing position of the performer, facing the public” (Goldberg). There was also the belief, partially due to the instrument’s feminine shape and soprano range, that the violin was “a female instrument that must have a (male) master” (Goldberg). This view led to a “tradition of masculine and militant performances” (Nagel-Frazel), as well as the view that it was “inappropriately sexual” (Nagel-Frazel) for women to play a feminine instrument like the violin. The violin’s reputation as having links to the occult also may have “contributed towards it being thought unsuitable for women” (Powell, 5).

Sources:

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