

Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler: The Life and Times of a Piano Virtuoso. By Beth Abelson Macleod. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015). Pp. xii, 197, Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$55.00.) Reviewed by Amy Helene Forss in *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Volume 109, Number 3, Fall, 2016, p. 336-338.

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In *Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler: The Life and Times of a Piano Virtuoso*, author Beth Abelson Macleod lets readers know that Bloomfield-Zeisler led a double life, “one on the concert stage and one at home” (p. 115.) Her two-part being, at times diametrically opposed, became so integral to Bloomfield-Zeisler’s existence, that it drove her as a wife, mother, and musician to eventually deplete her health. She continued her performances at concert after concert in city after city even though the Victorian society in which she lived championed women mastering their homes and not their ambitions. Her ironclad will to establish herself in the simultaneous role of virtuoso pianist and “new woman” served as the thematic argument of Macleod’s well-written biography.

The author patiently walks readers through each chapter of Bloomfield-Zeisler’s chronological milestones by focusing on the virtuoso’s personal beliefs and professional accomplishments. Chapter 1 supplies the background immigration story of her orthodox Jewish family. The saga of the Blumenfeld (it changes later to Bloomfield) family’s move from Austrian German Silesia (current day southeastern Poland) to Chicago, Illinois in 1867. Numerous details later, several of which were tangential but included fascinating passages, such as the Chicago fire, the opening chapter ends eleven years later as the prodigy Blumenfeld and her mother return to Europe for professional training and polishing. In Chapter 2, Macleod methodically portrays the young musician as intensely committed to her craft. Her expenditure of rehearsal energy increasingly causes her to be stoically ill but she ignores her pain to gain stage performances. It was at this early point in her career that Blumenfeld, who for reasons unexplained, changes the spelling of her name. Now known as Bloomfield, she adamantly obsessively pursues her career, while telling her noted physician she would rather die than stop playing. As Chapter 3 focuses on Bloomfield’s marriage to husband Sigmund Zeisler, a defense attorney in the Haymarket Riot trial, it misses explaining a key point. Why did Bloomfield decide to hyphenate her name to Bloomfield-Zeisler? Macleod carefully analyzes most of the musician’s private and public decisions by comparing and contrasting them to contemporary’s actions, but the feminist name addition was unusual for this time; it begs an explanation or at least an educated conjecture. The greatest depth of attention paid to Bloomfield-Zeisler’s career was found in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Succinctly noting that the key primary source for the pianist’s life was Zeisler’s unfinished unpublished biography of his wife from the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives. The author astounds this reviewer with the amount of detailed documentation she culled from it. Macleod’s text supplies dates of Bloomfield-Zeisler’s local, national, and international recitals complemented with several of the songs performed, the artist’s performance fees, newspaper critic reviews, and even several images of the musician. In Chapter 7 the author

argues that Bloomfield-Zeisler's Jewish ancestry, in an era of heightened European and American anti-Semitism during World War I, was actually in the pianist's favor. It enabled her, as an exotic other to draw prominent members of society to her established Hyde Park home salon. Perusing the salon visitor book which provides an annotated list of "who's who" mingling at the Zeisler's allows an insightful glance of American elite. Macleod concludes the pianist's biography with a recounting of tragic happenings. Bloomfield-Zeisler brief moment of noted motherly happiness (she longed for a daughter after giving birth to three sons) dissolves with the little girl being still born. The pianist sinks into a deep depression, considering suicide because she believes the baby's demise was her fault. But, she tells her husband she is too cowardly to kill herself. Eventually, the lure of the piano and the stage returns her to emotional health. Critics declare Bloomfield-Zeisler's artistry intact even though her German heritage casts a suspicious light on her patriotism. The biography abruptly ends with the virtuoso dying of heart disease and Zeisler remarrying three years later.

Macleod's biography offers a valuable contribution to a limited collection of literature on female musicians performing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The author's work not only gives meaning to a heretofore famous pianist's achievements but also provides a volume exploring the dichotomy of "new woman" striving to have a family and a career. As the Bloomfield-Zeisler stated, "I often feel that home life and its environments hold something that is lost—sacrificed—in living for the public, but I cannot give it up. I play because I must" (p. 116.)