

Analysis of the feminine cultural and pedagogical codes of the musical talent of the Spanish prodigy pianist Maria Vallès at the early 20th century

Sandra Soler-Campo*

Elia Saneleuterio**

*Corresponding Author, Prof. Dr., Department of Music, University of Barcelona. Campus de Mundet, Pg. de la Vall d'Hebron, 171, 08035 Barcelona, Spain. Email: sandra.soler@ub.edu ORCID: 0000-0002-5560-1415

**Prof. Dr. Department of Language and Literature Teaching, Grupo de Investigación TALIS, Universitat de València - Avda. Els Tarongers, 4; 46022 València, Spain. Email: elia.saneleuterio@uv.es ORCID: 0000-0003-4060-9518

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Abstract

This paper aims to find details about an excellent Spanish pianist from the beginning of the 20th century who starred when she was a little child: her name was Maria Vallès. Not many news are known about her brief biography since she had a short life and little could develop and become known as a pianist. Through a research work some press articles from the first decades of the 20th century were found, which highlight the excellence of her piano performances in Spain. The aim of this research is to analyze the pedagogical codes for the training of a musical talent in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as the feminine cultural codes against a female prodigy artist, on the axis of Maria Vallès. This research was carried out according to the type of document analysis, which is one of the qualitative research types. Evidence documents regarding the prodigy phenomenon of the Spanish pianist were found. She played concerts basically in Catalonia, where she moved with her family when she was a little child. It should be also noted that she studied with one of the most prestigious pedagogues of the time, Molinari. He was her mentor and the one who introduced her to the Catalan cultural and musical life of the twenties, making her known among her peers who were also pedagogues and musicologists and the public attending her concerts. This research includes some codes for practitioners and pedagogues for the development of piano talent, in the example of Spanish pianist Maria Vallès, who was a prodigy child.

Keywords

Maria Vallès, music, piano, prodigy, women

Introduction

The life and work of the interpreter that will be narrated below is framed within the first decades of the twentieth century. From a chronological point of view, music from this century is referred to as contemporary music and has its origin in the nationalist movements of the last of the Romantic periods. The 20th century is a period in which changes and innovations in the world of the arts took place at great speeds. Several events, such as World War I (1914-1918), the Russian Revolution (1917) and World War II (1939-1945), greatly altered the consciousness of the general public. In Spain, the country suffered a devastating Civil War (1936-1939) which brought about

severe political, economic and social consequences (Blanco & González, 2020; Martín-Aceña, Martínez Ruiz & Pons, 2012).

In the musical world there did not exist a single unified idea as to how to compose, or which harmonies and melodies had to be followed. There were supporters of different schools of thought such as those who followed the impressionist movement; others who were considered expressionists; those who followed the principles of the school of Vienna, and finally a group of composers who continued utilizing methods of composition from the previous century (Lapeña-Gallego, 2020). As such, the 20th century begins with an existence of extraordinarily rich and varied

musical concepts. However, during this time, a new redefinition of aesthetic and formal art began, leading to a rise in movements which all had a common nexus: the desire to break away from the past (Asafyev, 1971; Oriol, 2005).

One of the greatest changes which took place during the 20th century was the inclusion and active participation of women in social, political and economic life. As the century wore on, women continued to grow in other newer areas. Their presence became habitual in theatres, cinemas, tea rooms, and even in social clubs, which, at the start of the century, were only accessible to men. During the twenties, and as a consequence of the impact of World War I on the role of women, some sectors of women in society had the opportunity to travel abroad and access progressive European publications (Gutiérrez, 2022; Wilson, 2005).

Barcelona's musical reality in the first decades of the 20th century lives an era of splendour. These early years, a period of changes and profound social, economic and political transformations throughout Europe, were key for the Catalan nation, which for centuries had been claiming its independence from the rest of the Spanish state. On the one hand, Catalan institutions have achieved national and international fame and prestige, something that had not happened before (Álvarez, 2019; Atienza-Barthelemy et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Catalonia was already enjoying of a pedagogical tradition since the beginning of the century (Soler, 2018). This musical pedagogy, which continued its evolution started in the 19th century, had received influences from Europe and continued to be projected in the different public and private educational institutions (schools, academies, conservatories...) of Catalonia. One of the most outstanding institutions was the Marshall Academy, in which prestigious pedagogues worked, such as the harpist Rosa Balcells, the teacher M. Perelló or the cellist Sans Sagrera. Other

examples of institutions to be highlighted from this period in Catalan areas were the Conservatori del Liceu, directed from 1932 by Josep Barberà; the Escola Municipal de Barcelona, headed by Millet i Morera from 1930; and the Acadèmia Barcelona, founded in 1931 and annexed to the Escola Blanquerna, directed by the prestigious pedagogue Joan (Ezquerro & Ezquerro, 2018; Font Batallé, 2010).

Women and the Catalan Press

Towards the end of the 19th century, the news media industry began to grow into a medium of mass communication. In Catalonia, the so-called golden age of the press took place between 1890 and 1920. It should be noted that the magazine *L'Avenç*, and the newspapers *La Vanguardia* and the *Barcelona Daily Paper*, among other publications, were of a more anarchic dimension. Musical critics in the news media emerged during the first few decades of the 20th century. One of the first of whom was the musicologist and critic Joaquim Pena Costa (1873-1944), a pioneer ideologist of modern music in Catalonia. He created the magazine *Juventut* between 1900 and 1906. In 1901 he started the Wagnerian Association for which he was president, along with the Catalan musicologist Felip Pedrell. During this time, other specialized magazines would surface and develop including the prestigious *Revista Musical Catalana*. This Catalan publication began in January of the year 1904 by the *Orfeo Català*. The publication disappeared in 1936 due to the Spanish Civil War, but it started up once again in 1984, thanks to the impulse of the *Consorci del Palau de la Música Catalana* (Gassol & Sopena, 2017; Rabaseda, 2023).

Several magazines served as a means to revindicate the female artist (Pugh, 1992; Soler, 2017). With this main objective, the publication *Feminal*, a personal project of the writer and musicologist Carmen Kerr i Alfonsetti, a monthly magazine, appeared in 1907 in Barcelona as a supplement of the *Il·lustració Catalana* newspaper. The magazine

Feminal was printed, uninterruptedly, for ten years until the start of World War I. The last issue was printed on December 30th, 1917; however, *Feminal* resurfaced once again in 1925. The purpose was to revindicate the role of women in a society that was progressively becoming more open, as it was manifested in the magazine's first edition:

It seems convenient to feminize [women] elevating her intellect [...] in order for her to become the true dreamed up companion of the intellectual and entrepreneurial man [...]. We believe that the time has come to move forward with the intellect of our women. We hope that by cultivating her spirit it will not be necessary to forcefully drink in far off fountains [...]. From those more progressive countries from which breaths of feminism originate, we are unable to receive it all; we must make a selection in order to allow it to develop into what is now Catalonia, and this selection must be done gradually. (Karr, 1907, p. 4)

The musical field was not an exception, as *Feminal* covered the musical career of several female instrumentalists, singers and composers. Some issues of *Feminal* even included some musical pieces by female composers. The published repertoire composed by women was 22% as compared to that of men which was 78%. The cover page of *Feminal* followed a pattern that was maintained until the end of the publication. The format would always be the same: at the top there would be a fringe of floral illustrations which surrounded the title and in a higher level another title with which it was published, *Feminal. Il·lustració Catalana*, printed with printing plates that would leave a small relief which could be seen in the inside of the cover of the magazine. The decorations, as well as the typeface, had a clear modernist influence and were even designed by Casademunt (Molas, 1975; Sonlleva, Sanz & Maroto, 2017).

Another of the objectives of *Feminal*, in addition to publishing various types of

music compositions, was to encourage young women to participate in all fields, whether educational, cultural, or social, for example regarding women's suffrage. The magazine thus intended to claim that the rights of women were equal to those of men, in addition to addressing other issues that could interest its readers: politics, art, sports, cinema, fashion, and so forth. For the Catalans, but also inhabitants elsewhere in Spain and the world where the magazine arrived, it came to fill a gap that the conservative magazines avoided (Rodrigo, 2017; Torrent & Tasis, 1966).

The Importance of Women's Contributions to Culture and Society

Thanks to these types of publications, we are aware of the impact of women's work on various fields, including musical performance. Reviewing these publications through didactic sequences for current musical training is a means of raising awareness of the obstacles that women have had to face to achieve recognition of their careers and comparing the past with the situation and possibilities of the present.

Aim of Study

The aim of this research is to analyze the pedagogical codes for the training of a musical talent in Spain at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as the feminine cultural codes against a female prodigy artist, on the axis of Maria Vallès.

Method

Research Model

This research belongs to the qualitative paradigm, specifically it is a biographical documentary research, whose interest lies in the peculiar musical career of the case selected to be studied. Given that the investigated facts are almost a century old, the archives in which they are documented are divided into primary sources on paper, mainly from the press of the time, but also official documentation from the administration; and secondary sources, which are very scarce.

Document

Thus, the primary sources originate in analogical supports archived in newspaper archives, mainly in Catalonia. The sources were mainly found and consulted in the newspaper library of the library of Catalonia. This manages the periodical publications (newspapers, magazines, weeklies...) that enter the BC by donation, exchange, purchase or Legal Deposit, catalogs them and contributes to their acquisition, conservation, preservation and digitization.

The archives kept by different relatives of the pianist were also consulted. Also, in Mequinensa, her native town, there are archives of her life and work in the Jesús Moncada Research Center, which have also been consulted.

Regarding the secondary sources, and as mentioned in the acknowledgements, we have used the different documents, press articles, etc., that the Barcelona historian Jordi Estruga Estruga had been researching for the last ten years.

Results

The problematic of this research conditions the presentation of the findings. These will be presented in two sections, one for the information on her biography and the other for her concert reviewed by the press.

Maria Vallès: The Biography of a Young Pianist in Barcelona at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Maria Vallès Sostres was born on October 15th, 1917, in Mequinensa (Zaragoza) (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Picture of Maria Vallès from her youth

Like many of the students of regulated education in the conservatories or official music schools, she received musical training from a very young age, first under the tutelage of her father, the pianist Leopoldo Vallès, a native of the same town. In addition to giving piano lessons, her father used to entertain the clients of the *El Jardín* ('The Garden') café with his piano recitals and was even responsible for interpreting the soundtracks of the silent films that were projected in the Aragonese town at the time. Years later, the Vallès family moved to Barcelona, where she continued her musical studies as a pupil of the renowned Barcelona pianist and pedagogue Joan Molinari i Galceran (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Joan Molinari

She continued her training with Molinari i Galceran in Barcelona, where she starred, and she also offered piano recitals in different towns of Catalonia, showing her advances with Molinari. This music and pedagogue was himself a disciple of maestro Granados and furthered his musical training in Paris and Geneva. Apart from his extraordinary teaching work, it is worth mentioning the apparatus he invented to improve the disposition of his students' hands, the so-called angular separator and the Molinari keyboard (Soler, 2018, p. 310). These instruments were intended to favor the independence of the fingers and to adapt to the specific needs of each student and adapt to the specific needs of each one of them. Molinari founded in Barcelona the Molinari Academy of Music, where he put his new system into practice and where little Maria Vallès could study.

Maria Vallès' debut in concerts was reviewed by the press, which gave an account of her style and repertoire. Such reviews, if combined in a didactic sequence that makes the objectives explicit, can be motivating and inspiring for conservatory students, especially girls, from whom such examples are often hidden in education, typically due to ignorance or lack of interest among teachers.

Maria Vallès: The Career of the Young Pianist by the Catalan Press

Maria Vallès is a clear example of a child prodigy. A female reference that should be made known to the scientific community and to society in general through musical education because she can be considered a female reference for several reasons. On the one hand, she developed her artistic career at a time when women had little access to the artistic world. She was rarely able to show her talent in society. In this context, press also played a key role. Thus, little by little, publications appeared in which the artistic work of some of the women of the time was highlighted, both in the musical field and in painting, sculpture, writing, etc.

Following the concert programs that have been found in the research process, the works performed by Maria Vallès were fundamentally pieces by the great masters of classical music. That is to say: Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin among others. Here are some excerpts that praise the piano performances of the young musician.

The article published on July 10th, 1929 in *La Publicitat* explains in detail the interpretation of the young Maria Vallès, as well as the pieces she performed on the piano:

During a private concert which took place last Monday at the Palau de la Música Catalana, the extremely young pianist, Maria Vallès, was presented to a group of known musicians and musical critics, a revelation which clearly was a true success.

During the session this past Monday, we listened to sonatas from Mozart and Scarlatti, a Nocturn and an étude of Chopin, a variety of musical compositions by Schubert, Grieg, Albéniz... A full program of a concert pianist, which would have been unreasonable for many, was played by Maria Vallès with the most charming ease and accomplishment, maintaining at all times the attention of those who were listening [...]. (p. 4)

One month later, *the Revista Musical Catalana* published on 1929:

Maria Vallès. The final musical concert of the current course held at the Palau de la Música Catalana was offered by an extremely young pianist. Maria Vallès, an eleven-year-old girl, who revealed herself to have the strong artistic temperament and the exceptional cultivated skills of the difficult art of piano playing. Her interpretations of Mozart, Scarlatti, Chopin, Schubert, Grieg and Albéniz revealed a clear and sharp sensibility worthy of the most enthusiastic encouragement. (Soler, 2018, p. 308)

In the *Recvll Magazine*, number 327, published September 14th, 1929, the following text appeared:

Last Tuesday, at the Primer Casino's Ballroom, the young girl Maria Vallès offered a piano concert. Everyone who had more or less heard of this young eleven-year-old, with truly extraordinary musical talents, did not want to miss such a magnificent opportunity to hear her. (p. 1)

They were not alone. *La Vanguardia* published on November 30th, 1929, another article in the section "Music and Theaters" in which Maria Vallès is mentioned:

Today, Saturday, at 7pm in the evening, the announced piano recital by the prodigious eleven year old girl Maria Vallès, who is awakening great interest, will take place in the halls of the Real

Círculo Artístico, where she will perform works by Mozart, Scarlatti, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Grieg and Albéniz. (p. 1)

Recvll was a magazine from Blanes published monthly in Catalan. It defined itself as an "open and plural" publication that expresses "the concerns" of the inhabitants of Blanes.

It was born thanks to three young men—Luís Roch, Josep Ruiz and Francesc Balliu—who had just finished their studies at the Santa María de Blanes school. The first copy was published on June 12th, 1920. However, the weekly publication was altered by the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930), during which Recvll suffered military censorship.

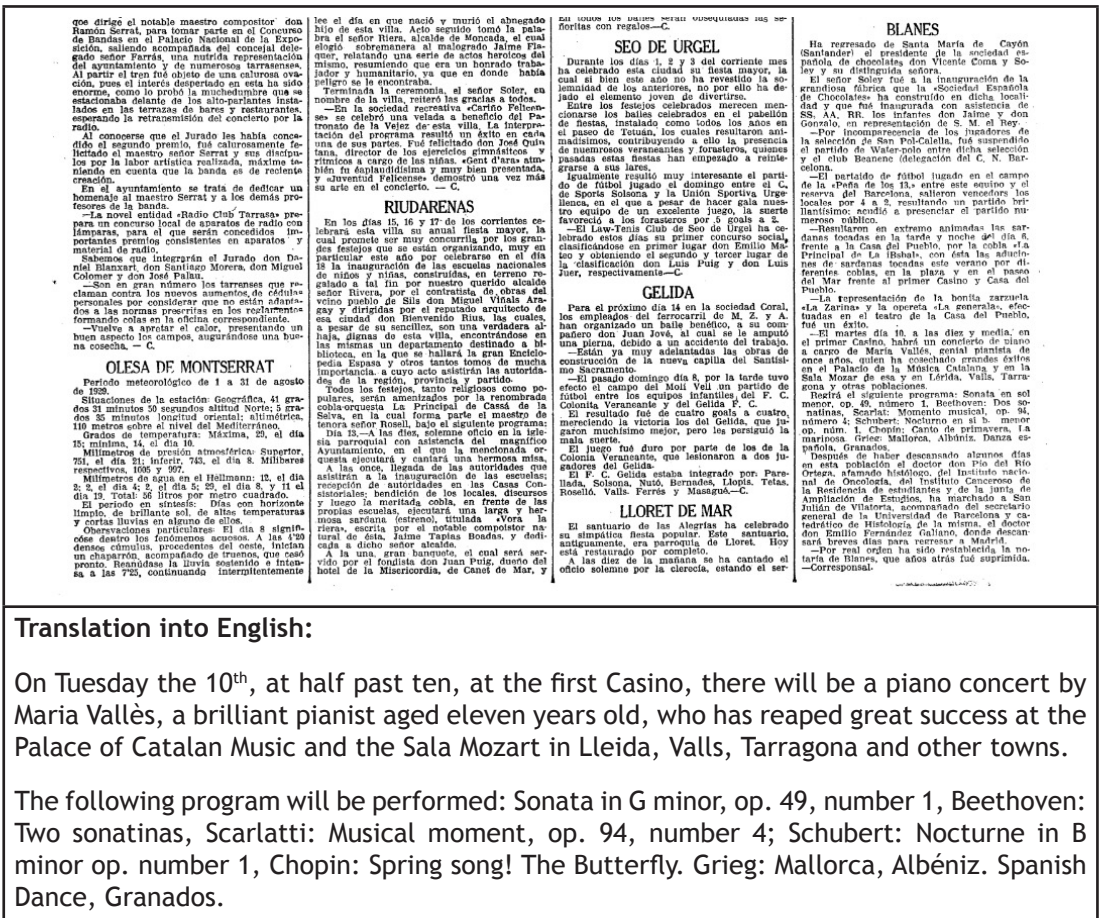


Figure 3. News about concerts in Blanes in Recvll, September 14th, 1929

The articles published were under constant threat of suspension due to the Catalan ideology of the magazine, which was contrary to the regime. The 1930s proved to be a decade of great cultural activity for this magazine from Blanes (fig. 3).

In the above mentioned La Vanguardia, page 35, Maria Vallès had appeared before (fig. 4). In addition to the press articles that have been selected, dozens of articles have been found, all of which state that Maria Vallès was a celebrated young pianist who astounded audiences by performing such complex pieces at her age.

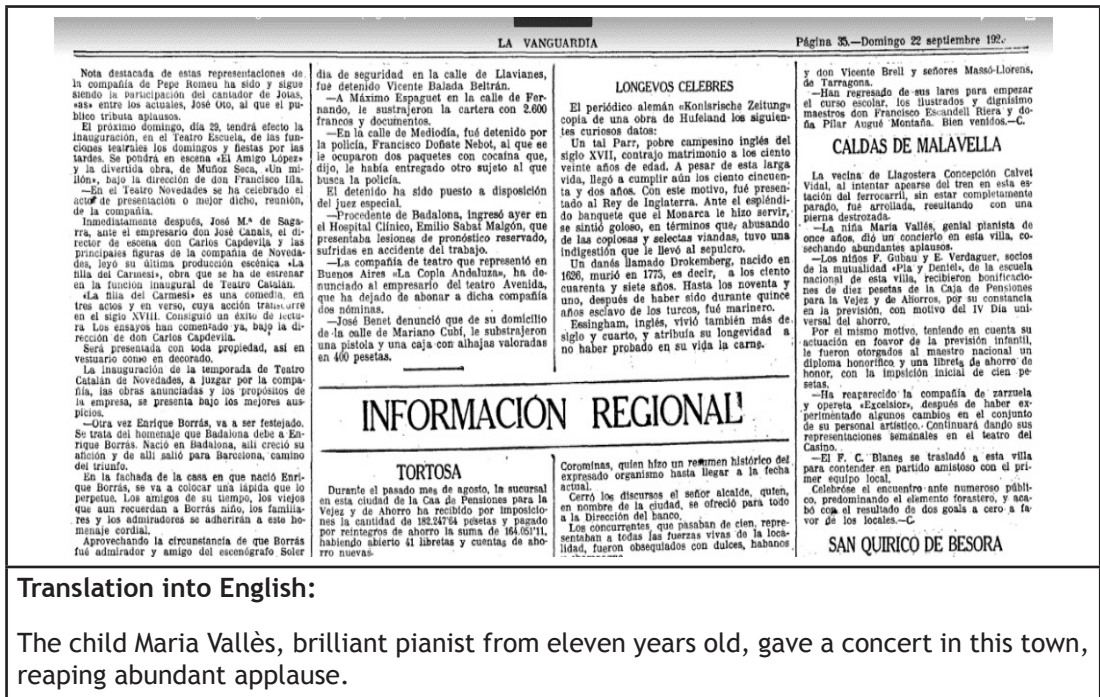


Figure 4. *La Vanguardia*, September 22nd, 1929

One year after her initial success at the *Palau de la Música Catalana* and of the many subsequent concerts performed by her, of which the Catalan press provided a record, the young girl continued to mesmerize the public with her talent at the piano. The World's Fair, which took place from 1929 to 1930 in Barcelona, brought about great progress to the city in many areas (urban, economic, technological, etc.). The premises of the Expo, a project built by Puig and Cadafalch, included two types of buildings: palaces and pavilions. The first were dedicated to hosting official events. At the *Palau de Projeccions*, designed by Eusebi Bona and Francisco Aznar, the young Maria Vallès performed, as we can read on the newspaper *La Vanguardia* (June, 14th, 1932).

Among her last performances that could be highlighted and that were recorded by the press was that of June 14th, 1932, at the *Palau de Pedralbes* in Barcelona. Among those present at the concert were the Regional Minister of the *Generalitat*, Mr. Gasol; the university professor Mr. Amorós;

the secretary of the *Escola Normal de la Generalitat*, Mr. Sanz; the aforementioned Carme Karr, director of *Feminal*; a teacher at the *Escola de Magisteri Primari*, Ms. Cuscirita; and the representatives of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, Mr. Puig, Mr. Ferreter and Mr. Sbert.

Conclusion and Discussion

Through this paper, it is intended on the one hand to rescue a period of Spanish history, in which women artists were present and active (timidly compared to men), and on the other to highlight the figure of the young pianist Maria Vallès.

At the beginning of the 20th century, in Spain, the figure of a woman artist was an exception among a majority of men in the schools of Fine Arts and in the artistic circuit of public contests and exhibitions in private galleries (Narayan, 1998). This generalized lack of interest in women artists in the specialized and cultural press of the time contrasts with the constant monitoring of women painters, draftswomen and craftswomen in the women's supplement that the *Il·lustració*

Catalana began to publish monthly from 1907 to 1917: the previously mentioned *Feminal* magazine. Beyond the Catalanist aspects, the magazine transmitted about the artists the sexist clichés of an era that still admitted the biological determination of genius (Rodrigo, 2017). Also, there were topics such as the distrust of female creative talent during this period and the professionalism of women artists, the prejudiced criticism they received, the veto they had to work in the great pictorial genres and, in general, the difficulties to combine family and professional life (still present in the 21st century).

This research has contributed to know more about prodigy children in the 20th century, concretely about a pianist girl, Maria Vallès. Finding information about her has been a difficult and arduous task, but at the same time it has been a rather gratifying challenge. News articles about her concerts which took place in various concert halls throughout Catalunya from 1929 to 1936 were feasibly found, albeit it was a rather laborious task. The last article about one of her performances was found in *La Vanguardia* on April 24th, 1937, but after that date nothing else has been found. After many additional yet unsuccessful attempts, the final proof of her life was found in the Barcelona Registry Office's Death Records (2022):

Maria Vallès died on June 14th, 1937 at the age of 19 at the Catalunya General Hospital as a result of pneumonia. She is buried at the Poble Nou cemetery in Barcelona, in niche 547 of the Department I, island 3 interior, property of the family of her music professor Joan Molinari, as said niche is registered under the name of Josep Maria Costa Molinari and in it are interred deceased persons with the last name of Molinari. (p. 1)

For the authors of these press releases, Maria Vallès revealed a clear sensitivity, worthy of the most enthusiastic encouragement. In light of her brilliant gifts and natural musical instinct, they predicted that when she had completed her musical studies, the

young Vallès would undoubtedly achieve resounding success. However, as documented above, a fatal illness suffered at a young age eliminated this possibility.

It is clear that this is a research work which is still in progress. More and more press articles from reputable media of the time could be found, praising her talent. However, for the moment (and also because she died very young), no more information has been found beyond what is shared with the scientific community.

Although the bibliographic and artistic information that has been found so far about the artist is not very numerous, it can be fervently believed that it is necessary to make available to society all the information that has been found about her work. She is a female figure that deserves to be known: on the one hand, because of the talent she possessed in her piano interpretations and, on the other hand, as a feminine reference for young music learners, especially little girls as she was.

From the point of view of coeducation, we believe that it is necessary that students of schools, high schools, universities or conservatories know the life and work of Maria Vallès.

Recommendations for Further Studies

This research work is still in an initial phase. As described in the paper, its origin, historical context, as well as the different chronicles that allude to Maria Vallès' piano performances have been found in several media. For the moment, the research work is in this phase and the goal is to continue consulting newspaper archives—main and secondary—with the aim of expanding on the life and work of the child prodigy Maria Vallès.

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Biodata of Authors



Sandra Soler is a Cum Laude Doctor in Music Pedagogy and has degrees both in Musicology and Music Pedagogy. She completed her studies specializing in the Kodály's musical pedagogy in Hungary and also earned a Master of Applied Research in Feminist, Gender and Citizenship Studies. She currently combines her teaching and research work at the University of Barcelona (UB) and at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC).

Affiliation: University of Barcelona, Spain.

Email: sandra.soler@ub.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-5560-1415

Web site: <https://webgrec.ub.edu/webpages/000008/cas/sandra.soler.ub.edu.html>



Elia Saneleuterio is a faculty member at the Department of Language and Literature Teaching at the University of Valencia, Spain, where she received her Ph.D. cum laude, in 2011, and previously graduated in Spanish Philology and Education. She also earned her master's degree in Specific Didactics Research (Language and Literature Teaching). She has been a Visiting Scholar at the Università di Bologna (Italy) (2009), Uniwersytet Wrocławski (Poland) (2012), University of California, Berkeley (USA) (2016), Universidade do Minho (Portugal) (2017), Universidad Católica Boliviana (Bolivia) (2017), Rutgers University, Newark (USA) (2018) and Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne (France) (2019), among others. Her research has focused on the study of assessment in Higher Education, cooperative learning, collaborative review processes, teaching and learning of spelling, vocabulary and grammar. She is also currently conducting research about literary education, symbolism in literature, character constructions, and children's animation movies.

Affiliation: University of València, Spain.

Email: elia.saneleuterio@uv.es

ORCID: 0000-0003-4060-9518

Web site: <https://www.uv.es/uvweb/college/en/profile-1285950309813.html?p2=sateme&idA=>

