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**CONDITIONS OF DOUBLE EXCELLENCE:  
THE CASE OF MICHELINE OSTERMEYER**

**Key words:** elite, athletics, piano, relations sport-music, biography.

ABSTRACT

Micheline Ostermeyer was an exceptional figure in the history of French sport: at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, she became a triple Olympic medalist in the high jump, shot put and discus, and at the same time, she embarked upon an international career as a virtuoso pianist. This article proposes an analysis of the conditions for this unique double excellence (piano and athletics) of Micheline Ostermeyer. More specifically, it demonstrates how this dual trajectory of excellence appears to have been built around athletics as “an essential complement to her art.” For this purpose, the influence of her education should first be analyzed. It is also important to look at the ways in which she developed her two areas of excellence based on the idea of athletics as the “essential complement to her art.” Finally, it should be noted that the organization of French athletic training of the day constituted two other significant conditions for Micheline Ostermeyer’s double success.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of French sport, Micheline Ostermeyer appears to be unique, combining, as she did, two types of excellence in two very distinct cultural areas: piano music (“high culture”) [1] and track and field sports (more of a “popular” culture kind) [2]. In one year, in 1946 she took the first prize in piano from the National Conservatoire in Paris (in July) and a silver medal in the shot put at the European Championships (in August). Two years later, in 1948, she became a triple Olympic medalist in the high jump, shot put and discus at the Olympic Games in London, while she was pursuing an international career as a virtuoso pianist. From this perspective, Micheline Ostermeyer’s career is remarkable – she excelled in one of the most socially distinctive musical instruments, while at

the same time enjoying success at the highest level of French and international sport in one of the most “popular” disciplines in terms of media coverage and identity as a “basic sport” in physical education of young French people [3] (social recruitment into the sport elite was still relatively selective [4]). Moreover, Micheline Ostermeyer was successful in a range of other athletic disciplines (shot, discus and high jump). Although she undoubtedly benefited from the absence of Russian athletes, who were amongst the best in the world, and from relative specialisation preferred by athletes [5], she nevertheless excelled in disciplines requiring very different physical abilities, with relatively diverse socio-cultural legitimacies [6].

It is suggested that the two types of Micheline Ostermeyer’s excellence (music and sport) appear to have been built around a repre-

sentation of athletics as “an essential complement to her art”, from her early years to the time of her greatest successes. For this, we will look at the influence of the education she received (a “new education” characteristic of the French cultural “elite” at the beginning of the century) and socially recognised excellence in music and sport already during her childhood. We will then look at how she developed her two areas of excellence based on the idea that athletics was the “essential complement to her art.” We will describe how Micheline Ostermeyer assigned a hierarchical legitimacy to these two activities at the same time as complementarities at the origin of her successes, which seems to have created a significant condition for the possibility of her double excellence.

## METHODS AND MATERIAL

The study was based, first of all, on the “primary” [6] biographical material: the accounts given to us by Micheline Ostermeyer during semi-directive interviews that took place in 1998, 1999 and 2000 [7], and “Bobards” – a document produced by her father containing numerous newspaper articles and photos accompanied by her father’s comments. The “secondary” sources included biographical material, in particular Micheline Ostermeyer’s biography by Michel Bloit [8] and the film produced by Pierre Simonet [9].

## RESULTS

*The influence of “new education” characteristic of the French cultural “elite” at the beginning of the century and socially recognised excellence in music and sport from childhood.*

In 1946, Micheline Ostermeyer took the first prize in piano from the National Conservatoire in Paris. Achieving this high distinction was part of her family tradition. Micheline’s mother’s lineage was marked by a long musical tradition, particularly the piano. Her great grandfather on her mother’s side, Alexandre-Paul Laroche, was a piano teacher. Her grandfather on her mother’s side was also a piano teacher. He excelled in piano studies and musical composition in the company of Gabriel Fauré, at the Niedermeyer school in Paris under the renowned Professor Camille Saint-Saëns.

As a composer and virtuoso pianist, he spent time with some of the great artists of the time, particularly Gabriel Fauré and his girlfriend Magda Tagliaferro. In 1908, he founded the Conservatoire de Musique of Vannes. He was also the director of an opera society (the Athénée musical) and the Philharmonic. He even assembled a vast array of instruments, including an extensive range of pianos, on the ground floor of his house. Her mother Odette Laroche, last born of a family of four children, was also a piano teacher (as a child, she turned the pages of Gabriel Fauré’s score when he gave a concert at the Conservatoire of Vannes). Micheline Ostermeyer’s childhood was thus immersed in a family piano culture at the highest level. Yet, as with many other families of the cultural elite at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [10], the Ostermeyer family also enjoyed English-style leisure physical activities. Her grandfather on her mother’s side was President of the Société des Régates de Vannes and founder and administrator of the Compagnie Vannetaise de Navigation. During the school holidays spent at île aux Moines, he would constantly be out on the family boat, Pen Duick I. Micheline Ostermeyer’s mother had also, for many years, taken part in regattas and, during the summer, the family played tennis. Micheline Ostermeyer enjoyed the “new education” adopted by the French cultural elite at the beginning of the century. Her family therefore placed an emphasis on music, notably the piano, signifying both refinement and elegance [11] and, at the same time, took a vivid interest in sporting practice, a sign and proof of physical strength: “My father, who had phenomenal strength, was proud that his daughter was also strong and put this strength to use. My family was very happy that I successfully embraced a physical activity” [12]. From this perspective, Micheline Ostermeyer’s double excellence in the piano and in athletics appears to be an extension and realisation of both sporting and artistic dispositions forged in a family culture typical of socially and culturally privileged society, which valued a “non-conformist education built on music and sailing.”

This combination of music and sport can be construed as natural for Micheline Ostermeyer as she pursued this musical and sporting practice from her very early years. During her holidays at île aux Moines at the age of around ten, she gave concerts and won competitions organised by a beach club. This cultural combination of two areas of

excellence had always been promoted by her family, particularly by her mother: “In 1946, when she [her mother] came to France for my piano competition at the National Conservatoire in Paris, she also came with me to Bordeaux two days later for the French championships: she followed my sporting performances with almost as much passion as the piano.” Her mother played a decisive role, in line with that of all middle-class women who are in charge and in a position to transmit the culture required to maintain their social status, and who manage the leisure time of their children in order to maintain the chosen educational strategies [13]. Micheline Ostermeyer’s mother took advantage of several weeks of bed rest after the birth of her younger brother to introduce her daughter to the piano at the age of just four. Micheline, the oldest and only daughter quickly found herself in a position to incorporate the piano and sporting dispositions of her mother’s lineage.

Micheline Ostermeyer was able to master this combination of music and sport because her excellence in these two areas was socially recognised from the very early age, notably due to Micheline’s taking part in competitions. Following B. Lehman’s comments on orchestral musicians, the logic of competitions (end-of-year competitions, conservatoire entrance competitions) favours individual exhibition and performance [14]. In 1932, at the age of ten, she took the first prize in music theory at the Tunis School of Music. In 1933, she was awarded the first prize in piano. She gave her first major recital at the age of 12. In this sense, Micheline Ostermeyer’s career path appears to be in line with the lineage of her maternal grandfather, who himself combined music and sport at the highest level and who undoubtedly constituted a model of demand for excellence with no disappointments [15]. Micheline Ostermeyer’s early incorporation of piano and sporting dispositions took place during summer holidays organised by her maternal grandfather at île aux Moines (in Brittany) combining music and outdoor leisure. At the family home, summer mornings were devoted to two-part musical exercises, sung from the old libretto her mother learned from him. Each year, from the age of eight onwards, a public recital was organised for his granddaughter. The summer period undeniably constituted a springboard for Micheline Ostermeyer’s career. As E. Mansiau-Rigau comments, these meetings, which traditionally took place in the family homes during the summer, were the opportunity for the head of the

family to ensure the continued good name and cohesion of the family, and helped to ensure the stability of the family structure and lay down a logic for preserving its heritage [16].

Micheline Ostermeyer’s double excellence therefore appeared to be the result of family heritage (on her mother’s side) and the “new education” of a family belonging to the French cultural elite at the beginning of the century. This family believed that combining music and sport constituted a balanced life style conducive to success. The non-conformist combination of athletics and piano, as practiced by Micheline Ostermeyer was, perhaps, simply the height of aristocratic impertinence favoured by the French aristocratic and wealthy classes. These classes, steeped in the ideal of creativity and elegance, also – according to E. Mansiau-Rigau – liked to distance themselves and cast a critical eye over the standards of their own social group by overturning the rules, interpreting and adapting them and playing with conventions. This freedom was a mark of their superiority [17].

*Micheline Ostermeyer developed her two areas of excellence based on the idea that athletics was the “essential complement to her art”.*

Micheline Ostermeyer was successful in athletics and in the piano, assigning a hierarchical legitimacy to these activities quite distant from a socio-cultural viewpoint. First, she always regarded athletics as “an essential complement to her art”, prioritising both activities in terms of the time devoted to each, over the course of the year and scheduling the time spent on them each day. Thus, when she took up athletics in the early 1940s, she was only 18 years old; she only did athletics in the summer and trained twice a week like the majority of other women athletes at that time. As for the piano, she had been playing since childhood, all year round and every day. “At that time, athletics competitions were only held in summer or at the end of spring; we trained for two hours two or three times a week. So there was plenty of time left for the piano. Basketball competitions took place in winter and training only lasted a few hours a week. So there was no problem apart from piano tours.” Athletics came “after” the piano all year round, and also each day, even when Micheline Ostermeyer was actively preparing for the London Olympic Games as a trainee at the INS (French National Institute of Sports) during the month prior

to the Games. "Of course I always did a lot of piano practice, five hours a day on average, compared to two hours of athletics". She devoted far less time to athletics than to the piano and it came "after" the piano, at the end of the day, allowing her to maintain optimal physical and mental capacity for the piano. "As far as piano practices was concerned, I realised that after doing the high jump, my arms were tired (in the California roll we fall on our hands). So I couldn't play the piano after doing the high jump, but the reverse wasn't a problem. Putting the shot was a bit hard on my index finger, but apart from that, nobody advised me against sport." Priority was thus given to the piano. As it is possible to reach the highest levels without frantic training, as long as you are in good physical shape (which she was), investment in athletics can be secondary. "I would have given up sport, at least competitive sport (...). As our training schedule was light, the question didn't arise. I had time to play enough music. I wouldn't have hesitated to give up competitive sport."

She then assigned a different legitimacy to these two activities by using different practice methods for them. Athletic training was treated by her as a leisure activity, "free time", which counter-balanced the constrained and constraining time spent in stationary, painstaking and demanding work at the piano. "Since I was free to do what I liked apart from piano practice, I really enjoyed going and doing a sports activity after sitting down for a long time." While Micheline Ostermeyer saw sports time as a group activity, an almost liberating time for self-expression, she considered music time to be personal, introspective and serious time. "It was a totally enjoyable life, with a good physical balance. Sitting down for long periods was followed by active movement combined with contact with other young athletes. Friendship, the joy of being together, laughing, there's none of this in music practice where the atmosphere is always very serious. Even though you're happy, you can't laugh when you're playing music. So sport gave me a certain kind of happiness while the happiness I gain from music is more internal." There was no shame in this dilettante attitude towards athletics, which was quite in keeping with the ideas that prevailed among the throwers of the time, even though it conflicted with the requirements of the federal coaches in terms of rigour, work, effort and seriousness.

Lastly, Ostermeyer as a musician saw her piano work as a component of her athletic success, because it helped endow her upper limbs with muscular qualities which are normally developed by athletic exercises. "It wasn't the music but the several hours of daily piano practice all my life that did for me what bodybuilding does for athletes. I didn't lift weights or dumb-bells, I played the piano five or six hours a day, gaining maximum strength in my fingers, arms and shoulders. That's how I developed my muscular capacity." Crediting piano "work" for her muscle development, she avoided certain athletics training sequences, especially those devoted to body-building, although her coach, André Gardien, suggested she did this type of training.

Thanks to her rigorous and solitary hours at the piano, she developed and justified an aesthetic method of athletic practice, which accorded with the prevailing ideas of athletes but which also came under increasing criticism from the federal management who favoured body-building as a way of improving the weak performances of the French throwers at international level. With this aesthetic distancing and justification of athletics, this practice now became legitimate and even distinctive. Conversely, Micheline Ostermeyer attributed to athletic training a role in muscular development which suffused her musical technique with a distinctive "male" strength which was a contributory factor to a rare type of excellence. "I had a particular way of playing, stronger than some pianists, even though small female pianists manage to create a big sound. Weak men also create this strength through nervous impulses. They produce this big sound by a sort of nervous projection. In my case, I managed to produce this powerful sound using my muscles, with a certain degree of elasticity." Being both an athlete and a virtuoso pianist, combining a hedonistic culture of physical commitment, relaxation, the shared pleasures of friendship (associated with athletics) with an ascetic culture of remoteness, self-control and restraint (associated with the piano) appears to be a way of legitimising this cultural bivalence. To sum up, Micheline Ostermeyer's double trajectory of excellence was constructed on the basis of the different legitimacies accorded to the piano and to athletics, a perception of athletics as "an essential complement to her art".

## DISCUSSION

Due to her education and the perception of “athletics as an essential complement” Micheline Ostermeyer excelled in both athletics and piano. We should not, however, disregard two other significant conditions behind her success.

First of all, the piano and athletics elite was essentially Parisian, which meant she could be active in both “communities” at the same time. Thus, when Micheline Ostermeyer left Tunisia (where her family had returned to during the war) and returned, this time alone, to continue her studies at the National Conservatoire in Paris, she looked to pursuing and practicing these two activities concurrently. Since the institutions producing the piano and athletics elite in were in Paris, it was conceivable to practice both music and sport. Micheline Ostermeyer could expect to continue to develop her piano and athletics skills at the highest level at the same place. Being one of the first trainee athletes (and the first woman) at the Institut National des Sports, France’s elite sports training establishment at that time and belonging to a “great Paris club” and training with the national coaches of the time (Roger Debaye and André Gardien), Micheline Ostermeyer enjoyed the best training conditions (in terms of equipment, techniques, etc.). The Institut National des Sports provided a piano for her. She benefited from spatial athletics training and piano rehearsal conditions that made the pursuit of her double career path possible: “The golden age began for me from the moment I was able to stay at the Institut National des Sports: I had the use of a stadium and could therefore train between tournaments. Obviously, I still did a lot of piano work, on average five hours a day for every two hours of athletics. This would be impossible now as athletes train five or six hours per day.” This combination of piano and athletics was therefore, in part, linked to this spatial configuration and, more generally, to the Parisian piano and athletics elite. There is no doubt that the majority of French top-level athletes were in the Paris region [18].

The second condition is not negligible either. Micheline Ostermeyer’s double excellence was also due to the fact that French top-flight athleticism found itself in a transitional period in terms of training [19] and social recruitment [20]. Micheline Ostermeyer’s double excellence ultimately appears to be the product of an upper middle-class ethos during a period where there were fewer and fewer

athletes from the highest social classes, and during which the quantity and quality of training permitted a “double life”. Micheline Ostermeyer therefore embodied a past culture expressed in a context of social reconfiguration within French top-flight athleticism. As N. Elias remarks in his analysis of the musical milieu in the biography of Mozart: “We often like to present the high achiever of one or other era based on the scale of their creation, when on closer inspection, we see that there are more and more great creations precisely during the periods that can be qualified as transitional periods in relation to a basic historical classification” [21].

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