Fred, or Frédérique? Pseudonyms in a Modern Context

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This article discusses the use of pseudonyms by artistic creators. It explores the life of the writer Fred de Gresac [Frédérique Rosine de Grésac], who contributed libretti to Western classical opéra comique in addition to being a prolific playwright and screenwriter. It then examines pseudonym use in several contexts, and controversies surrounding the "Reclaim Her Name" campaign in literature to provide additional insights addressing the complexities inherent in pen names and identity. The article concludes with thoughts about how singers might balance the benefits of diverse representation while acknowledging historical context.

I recently came across the name Fred de Gresac while examining musical theater song anthologies during a collaborative project with Zipporah Peddle and Lauren Weber. A critical aspect of this research included encoding creators into various demographic categories to understand the kinds of identities presented in these resources. The coding involved significant searching through library databases to gather accurate biographic information and avoid biased assumptions that could have occurred using names alone.

Fred de Gresac was the professional pseudonym used by Frédérique Rosine de Grésac (1866–1943) in her varied authorial output of more than one hundred libretti, plays, and screenplays.[1] Grésac was born in France, where she worked as a journalist. Her husband, Victor Maurel (1848–1923), was an operatic baritone who originated roles in operas by Western classical (WC) composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1901).[2] After Maurel died in 1923, Grésac moved from New York to Los Angeles to work in the burgeoning film industry and became a known figure in queer Hollywood social circles.[3] The writer Frederica Alexandrina Sagor Maas (1900–2012) worked with Grésac at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios in the 1920s and, in her memoir, recalls Grésac's flirtations, describing her as, "sixtyish, with short, cropped, flaming red hair . . ." and adding, ". . . Fred wore pants and men's shirts and ties."[4]

Among Grésac's best-known writings is the libretto for *The Enchantress* (1911), an opéra comique with music by Victor Herbert (1859–1924) and lyrics by Harry B. Smith (1860–1936).[5] The aria, "Art is Calling for Me (I Want to Be a Prima Donna)," is probably the most familiar piece from *The Enchantress* to modern WC singers. Other significant writings include a screenplay for the motion picture *La bohème* (1926) and the book for the operetta *Sweethearts* (1913). Grésac's play *La passerelle* (1902) was so popular upon the French premiere that it was translated into English for a Broadway run as *The Marriage of Kitty* (1903) and adapted as the musical O*range Blossoms* (1922).[6]

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Throughout her career, Grésac seemed keenly aware of the reciprocal and intertwining relationship between audiences, creators, and critics. The *San Antonio Evening News* quoted Grésac in 1919 as saying, ". . . from my audiences I have learned the effect of what I have offered them, and from my critics I have learned to find my mistakes and to do better the next time."[7] This quotation and its underlying philosophy align with an earlier statement in the American women's magazine *The Delineator*. *Delineator* columnist Alan Dale lauded Grésac's work, saying, "the most brilliant feminine playwright I have ever met is the lady who signs herself 'Fred de Gresac'—a Frenchwoman who has taken up her residence in the United States."[8] Dale goes on to cite Grésac's belief that ". . . no play in which a woman is ridiculed or made the butt of laughter has the slightest chance of success" as evidence of the playwright's connection to audience values and subsequent accomplishments on the stage.[9]

Despite Dale's use of the term "feminine playwright" and the interest in critic and audience receptions of her work, Grésac signed a masculine pseudonym to her entire professional output to intentionally obscure her gender. A 1912 article in *The Indianapolis Star* reports that her first managers had requested she adopt the pen name Fred de Gresac.[10] Although pseudonym usage by artists is not a novel practice, it did seem to create inner turmoil for Grésac. The *Star* article, titled "Woman Playwright Says Public Prefers Men's Work," quotes her as saying:

> It may be timidity on my part, but I rather think the public likes its plays written by men. I felt dreadfully guilty on the opening night of my first operatic work in this country, because no one knew where to find Fred De Gresac, and I was harboring the guilty party all of the time. They cried for him and clapped their hands, but I sat perfectly still! How dreadful! N'est-ce-pas![11]

Curiously, the timbre of this quote seems to conflict with Maas's remembrance of her encounter with the screenwriter, whom Maas called Fred. Even in casual situations among other women where gender obscuration might not be needed, Maas's recollection implies that Grésac may have used the masculine pseudonym despite indications that it was not what Grésac had initially wanted. Perhaps Grésac embraced the name Fred later in life (likely in her sixties when she met Maas, circa 1928) but initially resented the name as an imposed professional expectation when she was younger (likely in her thirties, circa 1912). The validity of this conjecture is difficult to assess because, unfortunately, the bibliographic details of Grésac's life have yet to be well-documented.

The apparent conflict between her private and professional names led me to question what the best practice of honoring creator identity in a modern context might be. A primary goal set in the mission statement of the "Diverse Voices" column is to celebrate minoritized creators' contributions to the field of singing.[12] In alignment with this goal, the life of Frédérique Rosine de Grésac presents the opportunity to learn about a lesser-known author and the challenge of how best to credit the artist's output. Research evidence indicates that diverse public role models play a role in engendering positive self-image among individuals who share that identity.[13] Given this, how might we accurately refer to historical figures in a way that balances the importance of representation for modern audiences while respecting the cultural context in which these creators formed their identities? In short, do we credit the writer as Fred or Frédérique?

OBSCURING IDENTITY

The obscuration of a personal name in favor of a professional identity has a long history in artistic circles. The pop icon Cher (b. 1946) was given the name Cherilyn Sarkisian at birth. The operatic tenor Calogero Antonio Caruso (1929–2012) used the stage name Charles Anthony.[14] Pure anonymity was sometimes chosen by creators in higher socioeconomic classes due to what literature scholar Claudia Stokes describes as a "refined distaste for the vulgarity of public exposure."[15] Stokes argues that anonymity and pseudonyms were not always negatively related to oppressive societal or familial pressure. Instead, Stokes asserts that these practices were sometimes intentionally used because ". . . pseudonymity allowed women writers to respectably assert proprietorial authorship of their works, and it likewise suggests an interest in an extended literary career carried out over multiple texts and venues."[16] Contrastingly, Stokes discusses how whiteness intersects with pseudonym use to create a different standard for Black creators. She argues that, unlike their white peers, Black women in literature were often not afforded the grace to conceal their identity, but, instead, "were expected to prove their legitimacy through public attribution."[17]

A qualitative study by Dawn Bennett and her colleagues that explores pseudonym use among modern musicians argues that the reasons for doing so often arise from a desire for positive professional outcomes.[18] They assert that this practice is common in the workplace, where individuals highlight aspects of their personality conducive to their work environment.[19] A barista, for example, might emphasize extroverted, outgoing aspects of their personality in the workplace to reflect the norms needed for success in customer service. However, Bennett and her colleagues note that, among their sample group of composers, "concealment and fabrication strategies often had negative psychological consequences, whether or not the strategy had been deliberate."[20] Musicologist Marcia J. Citron asserts that composers sometimes choose pseudonyms to solicit critical feedback unbiased by gendered expectations of music, like those seen in an 1889 review describing *Concertstück*, op. 40, by Cécile Chaminade as "... strong and virile, too virile perhaps . . . ," going on to say, "I almost regretted not having found further those qualities of grace and gentleness that reside in woman's nature . . ."[21]

Significant scholarship points to societal pressure on creators in minoritized social groups as a reason for adopting a professional pseudonym. One study of entries in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* found that while male composers often adopted pseudonyms, women composers were three times more likely to do so.[22] Sociologist Gaye Tuchman notes that men were roughly as likely as women to adopt a pseudonym when publishing novels, but after novels became a part of upper-class culture and literature became professionalized, masculine names begat fame more often than feminine names.[23] Other artistic creators in musical history have chosen to adapt, rather than redefine, their identity. Musicologist Christopher Reynolds notes that, beyond societal expectations associated with marriage, using initials to mask identity instead of adopting a pseudonym was also a common practice.[24] For example, the American composer Henriette Blanke (1882–1958) signed her professional work as H. B. Blanke.[25] The WC American composer Amy Beach (1867–1944) initially published compositions as Mrs. H. H. A. Beach to align with the social expectations of an upper-class married woman.[26] Upon her husband's death and subsequent European performance tours, she used the name Amy Beach and noted in her will that she wished to be remembered by this name instead.[27]

However, recognition in a modern context is not as simple as abandoning the moniker associated with an artistic creation to favor a personal or given name. For example, in 2020, the Women's Prize for Fiction and Baileys (best known for the beverage Irish Cream) created a joint effort to republish twenty-five works of literature using each author's private name rather than the pseudonym the novels were originally published under.[28] This project generated significant controversy because, as literature scholar Eleanor Dumbill argues, the project might potentially erase acknowledgment of the social pressures or identities that informed the adoption of a pseudonym.[29] Dumbill argues that "choosing a name to publish under is an important expression of agency and using a different name without the author's input and consent deprives them of that agency rather than reclaiming it."[30] Rather than recognizing the complexities inherent in adopting a pseudonym, the "Reclaim Her Name" campaign arguably sanitized complex historical context.

Grésac is a clear case of these complexities in action. She was asked to adopt a male pseudonym for her professional work, but this request seems to have distressed her and caused her to feel disingenuous to her audience. Interestingly, even as social mores shifted, she retained the name Fred in her professional life and certain social circles. While contemporarily crediting authorial output to Frédérique Rosine de Grésac may seek to respect the inner turmoil she experienced about using a pen name, it may not genuinely reflect how she felt about this pseudonym across her whole life. She never retracted or republished works originally published as Fred de Gresac—perhaps due to the significant associated financial cost. While the libretto for *The Enchantress* bears a pen name, it remains unclear how Grésac wished her work to be credited.

IN THE STUDIO

The cultural contexts and histories surrounding the use of pseudonyms are complex and vary by time, locale, and individual. Pseudonym usage among composers and writers was a choice and means of positive empowerment for some, but for others, it conflicted with their self-identity. The potential for historical erasure caused by staunchly using names assigned by others to discuss musical creators is especially poignant for queer persons whose use of self-identifying language is nuanced by complex cultural norms and lived experiences.[31] Soley using private or given names, even if well-intentioned, may be historically inaccurate, culturally ethnocentric, and disregard the complexity inherent in human identity.

In the studio, this complexity creates an opportunity for thoughtful conversations that acknowledge the power of diverse representation for students and respect for both creators' published names and private identities. Some factors to consider in these conversations might include:

- Biases or discrimination against minoritized identities
- Creators' personal preferences
- Familial support or pressure
- Gender and/or sexuality identities
- Industry practices
- Norms across time and culture
- Religious beliefs
- Socioeconomic influences and values

Academic citation styles offer templates to recognize published pseudonyms and private names for citations in performance programs or advertisements. Importantly, it is crucial to be thoughtful about applying these suggested practices to known queer creators (and especially transgender persons) with a deadname that is no longer recognized or associated with themselves. *The Chicago Manual of Style* states, "a widely used pseudonym is generally treated as if it were the author's real name" and "the real name, if relevant, may follow the pseudonym in brackets."[32] In other words, the format for a written reference noting the authorship of the libretto for *The Enchantress* could be either Fred de Gresac or Fred de Gresac [Frédérique Rosine de Grésac].

The Modern Language Association (MLA) similarly suggests using brackets to indicate a second name associated with a piece. Additionally, their manual states, "... you can place the better-known form of the name in brackets, indicating that it has been supplied by you, and not include the less-familiar form found on the work."[33] An early edition of a work published by Amy Beach, for example, might be referenced as "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach [Amy Beach]," or "Amy Beach [published as Mrs. H. H. A. Beach]." Although not directly addressing the citation of an artistic work or the use of a professional pseudonym, the American Psychological Association (APA) states that those writing in this style should "refer to all people, including transgender people, by the name they use to refer to themselves . . ."[34]

CONCLUSION

Is it Fred, or Frédérique? The answer to this question seems to be: it depends. Discussions with students might acknowledge the complex cultural contexts of this question while also seeking to develop a positive self-image through diverse creator representation. When informed by historical norms, creator preferences, and known social constructs, these conversations might better help students understand the nuances of name and identity without imposing modern values onto the past.

NOTES

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