

20th CENTURY FRENCH ART SONGS

Mémoires française du XX^e siècle

Edited by Carol Kimball

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An abridged version of editor Carol Kimball's "Introduction" appears in the High Voice and Medium/Low Voice publications. Her complete length "Introduction" appears below. See the publications for the poetry texts in French and translations in English.

GEORGES AURIC (1899-1983)

George Auric was something of a child prodigy, performing a piano recital at the *Musique Indépendante* at the age of fourteen. The following year, the *Société Nationale de Musique* performed several songs he had composed. He studied composition at the Paris Conservatoire with Georges Caussade, and later with Vincent d'Indy and Albert Roussel at the *Schola Cantorum de Paris*. Before he was twenty, Auric had orchestrated and written incidental music for several stage productions and ballets. He composed a significant amount of *avant-garde* music during the years between 1910-20. Around 1914, he widened his acquaintances to include members of *Les Six*, a group of composers informally associated with Erik Satie and Jean Cocteau, and became a part of their group. Auric and Francis Poulenc became fast friends and remained so for life.

Music criticism was an important part of Auric's career; his writing focused on promoting the ideals of *Les Six* and Cocteau. He was also especially known for his film scores, which are consistently imaginative. He forged a major career in the English movies of the 1940s and '50s. Among his most well-known scores is the music for the film *Moulin Rouge*. Other popular film titles with scores by Auric include *The Lavender Hill Mob*, *Roman Holiday*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Bonjour Tristesse*.

In 1962 he became the director of the *Opéra National de Paris* and later, chairman of SACEM, the French Performing Rights Society. Auric continued to write classical chamber music until his death.

Le Jeune sanguine (1940)

from *Trois Poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin*
poem by Louise de Vilmorin (1902-1969)

This *mélodie* is the second song in Auric's cycle titled *Trois poèmes de Louise de Vilmorin*. Vilmorin's poetry reverberates with sensitivity to affairs of the heart. She was one of Poulenc's preferred poets; he set her poetry when writing specifically for the female voice, such as in *Fiançailles pour rire*.

A sort of veiled humor is at the heart of this text that describes a young hussy whose lover departs early with the dawn's first light, leaving her weeping disconsolately. Auric provides a prelude and postlude for formal balance as the miserable young woman mourns her loss. He also inserts several unexpected and amusing measures of a tango as the young man arches his back and leaves the sound of her sobbing. For his three Vilmorin songs, Auric used the style of a *chansonette*, or more popular song.

Printemps (1935)

Poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)

Auric composed this lilting waltz song for a play by Edouard Bourdet titled *La Reine Margot* (1935). The celebrated musical theatre actress-singer Yvonne Printemps created the role of Queen Margot of Navarre at Théâtre de la Michodière. Auric and Francis Poulenc collaborated on the incidental music for this play; Poulenc took the second act, Auric the first. Poulenc composed the *Suite française* and the song "A sa guitare"; Auric's contribution was "Printemps." Yvonne Printemps sang both songs in the play. Both composers used texts by Pierre de Ronsard, and the musical style of each is reminiscent of the Renaissance. Ronsard's original poem had twenty-three stanzas. Auric set only the first three.

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

Claude Debussy wrote expertly for the voice and was acutely responsive to transforming poetic nuance into musical expression. Possibly no other French composer was as attuned to blending poetry and music. His literary taste was highly refined and he maintained a visible and active role in the literary and artistic circles of his time.

He chose to set poetry of his contemporaries, notably Verlaine and Mallarmé. Verlaine's verse with its inherent musical qualities, provided Debussy with poetry for numerous works. For Debussy, poetry *as poetry* was the paramount determinant of the musical texture. His ability to detect the essence of a poem and perfectly transform it into musical expression makes his *mélodies* unique in the history of French song.

Le promenoir des deux amants (1904, 1910)

poems by Tristan l'Hermitte (c. 1601-1656)

“**Auprès de cette grotte sombre,**” the first song, made its first appearance with the title “La Grotte,” song two of *Trois chansons de France* of 1904. In 1910, it was retitled and combined with two other poems by Tristan l’Hermite (“**Crois mon conseil, chère Climène**” and “**Je tremble en voyant ton visage**”) to form the miniature cycle *Le Promenoir de deux amants*, which has been called the finest of all Debussy’s works for voice and piano. It is also the least-often performed. Debussy chose the texts from *Les Amours de Tristan*, a collection by the seventeenth-century poet Tristan l’Hermite.

The poems are set close to a grotto, secluded and silent. The transparent, barely stirring waters mingle with the silence of the cloistered spot, creating a dreamlike atmosphere. Debussy establishes an intimate, tender mood immediately and maintains this fragile mix of sound and color throughout the three *mélodies*. The interplay of resonance and texture in voice and piano results in an exquisite blend of light and shade, perfectly complementing l’Hermite’s poetic images. Subtly inflected vocal phrases are key to recreating the infinite calm and *Pelléas*-like atmosphere of the poetry, a perfect fusion of stillness and sensuality.

Fêtes galantes II (1904)

poems by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896)

Debussy’s fascination with the work of the French Symbolist poet Paul Verlaine resulted in his setting to music no fewer than seventeen of Verlaine’s texts. He composed two sets of three songs each, both titled *Fêtes galantes*, the first in 1892, and the second in 1904. *Fêtes galantes II*, Debussy’s last setting of Verlaine, closely following the composition of his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, is representative of the composer’s mature vocal works. It is marked by sparser textures, freer tonalities and a more concentrated compositional style than the first set; but like the first set, *Fêtes galantes II* presents three unrelated songs. None of the Watteau-like scenes are found here; rather, these three poems are filled with mystery, and are without sentimentality. The theme of time appears in each of the poems: the first, sentimental youthful remembrances; the second, inexorable fleeting time; and finally in the last song, time never to be reclaimed.

“**Les Ingénus**” recalls the first awakenings of sexual attraction, and deals with the breathless awe with which a group of unsophisticated young men of the mid-nineteenth century view their similarly naïve female companions. The scene unfolds in a highly chromatic texture, skillfully balanced to preserve the delicate, poignant images in Verlaine’s verse. Debussy’s free-floating harmonies are carefully contrived to complement the uncertain emotions and repressed sensations of the youths in the poem.

“**Le Faune**” begins with a prelude; time unravels in an inflexible dance featuring a rhythmic, hypnotic figure in the piano, imaging the traditional reed pipe and “tambourin,” a small drum played with a stick. The old terra-cotta statue in Verlaine’s poem is probably the woodland god Pan, playing a monotonous rhythm that is both sensual and slightly menacing, matching the mood of the two *mélancolique pélerins*. Mesmerized by the repetitive rhythms of drum and reed flute, the dejected travelers are caught in the whirlpool of passing time, which spins past as they watch helplessly.

“Colloque sentimental.” Colloquial (*colloque*) refers to ordinary speech or conversation. This disturbing poem is the touchstone of one of Debussy’s great *mélodies*. It is the last poem in Verlaine’s collection titled *Fêtes galantes*, and provides a chilling climax. It blends themes of despair, death and disillusion. In this extraordinary song, the ghosts of two lovers meet in a wintry park. As they speak of their former love, their words match the setting: glacial and detached from feeling. Throughout the song their wintry words are enhanced by Debussy’s simple and subtle vocal treatment: one voice urgent and persistent, the other stonily indifferent.

Debussy’s manipulation of musical texture between voice and piano is masterful. The sparse vocal lines are almost speech-like, and the piano figures mirror the frozen landscape in which this conversation—equally cold—takes place. The song’s kinship to Debussy’s opera *Pelléas et Mélisande* is unmistakable. The listener becomes one with the poem’s narrator, straining to see and hear the couple’s conversation in the icy cold of the deserted, frozen park.

Debussy reaches back to “En sourdine” (the first *mélodie* of *Fêtes galantes I*), takes the wistful song of the nightingale, and inserts it into this song at various points. The nightingale’s melody (“voix de nôtre desespoir, le rossignol chantera”) provides a touching and melancholy association, linking the two sets of *Fêtes galantes* together symbolically and musically, foreshadowing the disenchantment of love hinted at in “En sourdine” with the lovers’ conversation in “Colloque sentimental,” and unifying the two sets by a subtle musical component.

This panel of three *mélodies* was Debussy’s last setting of the poetry of Paul Verlaine.

Noël des enfants qui n’ont plus de maisons (1915) poem by the composer

This is Debussy’s last song, written to his own text, a Christmas carol for children made homeless by World War I. Its intensity comes from its simple sincerity. Debussy composed it on the eve of his first operation for the cancer that would end his life two years later. It was his personal protest against the invasion of northern France by the German armies. When asked for permission to orchestrate the song, Debussy refused, saying, “I want this piece to be sung with the most discreet accompaniment. Not a word of the text must be lost, inspired as it is by the rapacity of our enemies. It is the only way I have to fight the war.”

Originally composed in 1915 for piano and voice, Debussy also created a version for children’s chorus, and in 1916, a version for piano and two sopranos.

HENRI DUTILLEUX (1916-2013)

Henri Dutilleux studied at the Paris Conservatory with Maurice Emmanuel. He received the Prix de Rome in 1938 at age twenty-two, and went on to work at the Paris Opéra and the French Radio. France’s musical institutions defined his career: in 1961, he joined the faculty at the École Normale de Musique, teaching composition. In 1970, he taught at the Paris Conservatoire. He destroyed many of his early works, considering them derivative of Ravel, the preeminent

composer in France during his youth. His music that had been published avoided demolition. After World War II, Dutilleux concentrated almost exclusively on instrumental and orchestral music, much of which has been widely programmed and recorded.

His songs are not well known. In the chronological catalogue of his compositions, beginning in 1929, the *Quatre mélodies* for mezzo soprano or baritone is only the eleventh entry. It also exists in an orchestral version. The collection is dedicated to the French baritone Charles Panzéra and his wife, pianist Magdeleine Panzéra-Baillot, prominent interpreters of French song in the interwar years. Gabriel Fauré dedicated his last cycle, *L'horizon chimérique*, to Panzéra.

Quatre mélodies (1942) uses poems by four different poets and presents a delightful collection of moods, although it must be admitted that the level of the poetry is not uniformly high: “Féerie au clair de lune” (poem by Raymond Genty), a graceful scherzo of dancing fairies that evokes Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; “Pour une amie perdue” (Edmond Borsent); “Regards sur l’infini” (Anna de Noailles); and “Fantasio” (André Bellessort). The last *mélodie* is the most successful of the set and is one of two songs from the set (the other being “Pour une amie perdue”) that Dutilleux acknowledged. He wanted to exclude the first and third songs because their poetry was relatively mediocre.

Fantasio (1942)

from *Quatre Mélodies*

poem by André Bellessort (1866-1942)

“**Fantasio**” (the original title of Bellessort’s poem is “Les funérailles de Fantasio”) is a colorful poem that chronicles the funeral of the titled character, who has expired before the text begins. The poem, set in Venice during Carnival, is full of glittering and compelling imagery that changes quickly, following the pace of the Carnival. Musical textures are skillfully handled and exhibit some of Dutilleux’s developing style. “Pauvre Fantasio,” is heard several times during the text, acting as both a funereal chant that unifies the proceedings and perhaps as well, keeping the mourners’ footsteps marching together.

GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845-1924)

Gabriel Fauré was one of the great composers of French song who, with Duparc and Debussy, perfected the *mélodie* as a true art song form. He composed about a hundred songs, all original in conception, constantly developing in style, and pointing the way to future works. His songs express a broad range of emotion and a great variety of musical textures, extending the musical parameters of the genre and inspiring new techniques of song compositions. His songs are often divided into three compositional periods for purposes of study and definition.

Fauré has been characterized as a skillful watchmaker; with great precision his songs, which overflow with subtle nuances and delicate detail. His approach is in keeping with the French musical aesthetic: elegant and rational, dealing with sentiment rather than literal sensation. He was able to capture the entire poetic mood of each poem he set and to create an aura around it with his musical setting.

Dans la forêt de septembre, Op. 85, No. 1 (1902)
poem by Catulle Mendès (1841-1909)

This touching poem symbolizes the onset of old age. Mendès was among the founders of a literary magazine, *La Revue fantaisiste*, which published many poems of the Parnassian poets. Fauré's musical style perfectly suited this style of poetry: elegance of style, richness of rhyme, regularity and symmetry of rhythm. The Parnassians avoided the excessively romantic and aimed for "art-for-art's sake."

Fauré was nearly sixty years old when he composed this *mélodie*, and his reaction to this poem is beautifully poignant. The words describe the poet's reflective walk through a quiet, somber forest, capturing the chill of mortality and the overall mood of the turning point of life. The ancient forest, sensing a kindred spirit, provides the walker with a sign of friendship and understanding. Fauré set this contemplative poem in a rich harmonic musical texture with a vocal line that borders on quasi-recitative-like shapes. The solemn thoughts of old age call forth a melancholy, but it is a subtle melancholy. It is almost hymn-like in the fusion of words, emotions, and musical texture. This *mélodie* may be considered as marking the threshold to the final period of Fauré's compositions.

Accompagnement, Op. 85, No. 3 (1902)
poem by Albert Victor Samain (1858-1900)

This *mélodie* is a beautiful barcarolle—a nighttime scene, silvery and hazy, alluring but unreal. The image of the poet rowing on the lake is reflected in the musical texture. Fauré had a lifelong fascination with water imagery in music; this poem offers a little reel of unfolding pictures of a moonlight journey on a dark lake. The words "dans le rêve" tell us that this is all a dream. This is a rarely sung Fauré *mélodie* that yields great rewards for the performer.

Chanson, Op. 94 (1906)
poem by Henri di Régnier (1864-1936)

This poem has a gentle charm and a calm simplicity. It is the last of Fauré's madrigals that include delicate love songs such as "Lydia," and "Clair de lune." It has a wonderful fluidity that is a perfect foil for the poetic images.

The text is a simple set of variations on one theme: nothing on earth has any meaning unless the beloved somehow touches it. Fauré's reaction to the words called forth a musical setting of delicate transparency and limited range. It is not well known; like "Le Don silencieux,"

"Chanson" was published as a single song and therefore not widely disseminated. It is an example of exquisitely planned musical economy, and definitely belongs in Fauré's third period of musical compositions.

Le Don silencieux, Op. 92 (1906)
poem by Marie Closset (1875-1952), under the pseudonym Jean Dominique

Here is another little known Fauré song, a rarity because it was published separately and was never included in any of the Fauré *recueils*. The poem has a gentle melancholy—the plea of a timid lover, a mixture of hope and imagined disappointment. The words are tender and flowing, but the overall mood is one of unrelieved sadness. This song marks the beginning of Fauré’s third compositional period, which includes the cycles *La Chanson d’Eve*, *Le Jardin clos*, *Mirages*, and *L’Horizon chimérique*. Writing of this *mélodie* in a letter to his wife, Fauré said,

It does not in the least resemble any of my previous works, nor anything that I am aware of; I am very pleased about this...It translates the words gradually as they unfold themselves; it begins, opens out, and finishes, nothing more, nevertheless it is unified.¹

NOTES:

1. Quoted in Graham Johnson, *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* (London: Guildhall School of Music and Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2009), 291. Quotation from Jean-Michel Nectoux, *Gabriel Fauré: A Musical Life*, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 304. This is a translation of Fauré’s letter to his wife of 17 August 1906.

REYNALDO HAHN (1875-1947)

Reynaldo Hahn, Venezuelan by birth, came to Paris with his family at age four and made a brilliant career. In addition to his career as a composer and singer, he was director of the Paris Opéra, music critic for the newspaper *Figaro*, and conductor of the Salzburg Festival. He was enough of a scholar to edit some of the works of Rameau. He maintained close friendships throughout his life with actress Sarah Bernhardt and writer Marcel Proust.

During the *Belle Époque*, French *mélodie* was at the height of its development. Hahn was a *habitué* of the most fashionable salons, where he was in demand as a performer. On these occasions, he usually sang and played his own accompaniment, often with a cigarette dangling from his lips. The art of singing was one of his major passions, and he wrote three books on singing (*Du chant*, *Thèmes varies*, and *L’oreille au guet*), as well as a memoir of Sarah Bernhardt. Hahn’s songs are models of French restraint—devoid of overt display, with beautiful melodies in a modest vocal range. They reflect the style of his teacher, Jules Massenet. Hahn composed approximately ninety-five works for solo voice: eighty-four *mélodies*, five English songs to texts of Robert Louis Stevenson, and six Italian songs in the Venetian dialect. After 1912, Hahn composed in larger forms: opera, operetta, and film music. Perhaps his most famous work is his operetta *Ciboulette* (1923), which is still performed.

À Chloris (1916)

poem by Théophile de Viau (1590-1626)

“À Chloris” is No. 14 in *Deuxième volume de vingt mélodies*, the last major publication of Hahn’s songs during his lifetime. In many of his later songs, he turned to a deliberately archaic style. “À Chloris” features an elegant vocal line above a piano texture that features Baroque musical characteristics; it is its own piece, with ornamented melody and chaconne-like bass. Vocal line and piano piece are woven into a musical tapestry that is both declarative and intimate.

Poet Théophile de Viau was considered one of the most influential *libertin* poets during Louis XIII's reign. The *libertins'* verses had a unique charm that is instantly appealing, but somewhat artificial. Despite this, de Viau's love poetry is not bland, but full of suggestive passion and elegant wit.

ARTHUR HONEGGER (1892-1955)

Arthur Honegger composed over forty *mélodies* for voice and piano. Taken as a whole, they are diverse and imaginative. For his texts, he favored contemporary poets such as Jean Cocteau, Guillaume Apollinaire, Paul Claudel, and Paul Fort. He also chose to set unrelated poems by a single poet, such as his *Poesies* (Cocteau) and *Alcools* (Apollinaire). Poetry with strong imagery appealed to the dramatist in his personality.

For Honegger, as for most successful *mélodie* composers, the word provides the starting place. He is quoted as saying:

For me, the music a song is always dependent upon the poetic model. It must join so closely with the poetry, that they become inseparable and one can picture the poem in wholly musical terms. This is not to say that the music becomes subservient. It must be so crafted that it can stand on its own merits, playable without the text, logical and complete.¹

Born of Swiss parents in Le Havre, France, Arthur Honegger initially studied for two years at the Zurich Conservatory, but enrolled in the Paris Conservatoire from 1911 to 1918, studying with Charles-Marie Widor and Vincent d'Indy. Some of his more familiar large vocal works include the dramatic psalm *Le roi David* (King David), composed in 1921 and still in the choral repertoire; and his dramatic oratorio of 1935, *Jeanne d'Arc au bûcher* (Joan of Arc at the stake), with text by Paul Claudel, considered to be one of his finest works.

Between the world wars, he composed nine ballets and three vocal stage works, among works in other *genres*. His total compositional catalog is an impressive list of music: orchestral works, chamber music, concertos, ballets, operas, operettas, and oratorios. Widely known as a train enthusiast, he was passionately interested in locomotives, to which he attributed almost human characteristics. His "*mouvement symphonique*," *Pacific 231*, gained him early acclaim in 1923.

Honegger's musical style is a fascinating mixture of impressionistic effects peppered with penetrating dissonances. He had a fondness for mixing tonalities and using modality. His compositions for the voice display an eclectic focus of coloristic harmonies and architectural clarity. He was a member of *Les Six*, but unlike most of that group, did not share their overwhelming reaction against German romanticism. Honegger's musical style is fuller and more serious than his colleagues. He and Darius Milhaud were close friends. Honegger's generous body of song has proved of enduring interest to contemporary performers. His was a distinctive voice in the vocal music of the twentieth-century French *mélodie*.

***Trois Psaumes* (1940-41)**

from the *Huguenot Psalter*

Psaumes XXXIV and CXL translated by Théodore de Bèze (1519-1605)

Psaume CXXXVIII translated by Clément Marot (1496-1544)

The spirit of Bach shines in the first *psaume*, “**Psalm 34**,” in which a chant-like vocal line alternates with a gently moving episodic keyboard part. This call and response continues until the last three vocal phrases, when the vocal line merges with the instrumental texture in a psalm of praise.

The second song is “**Psalm 140**,” “*Ô Dieu donne-moi la délivrance de cet homme pernicieux*” (O God, deliver me from this evil man). Honegger’s biographer, Harry Halbreich, suggests that the “evil man” who was oppressing Europe in those last days of 1940 might be the reason for Honegger’s text choice. This piece was composed before the first and third songs. Its emotional mood peaks with the chorale tune “I know that my Redeemer liveth.”²

The last song in the set, “**Psalm 138**,” has the Latin title “*Confiteor tibi, Domine*” (I thank thee, O Lord) and is a paraphrase by Clément Marot, one of the greatest of the French Renaissance poets. It contains a familiar chorale tune, which is used in canon between voice and piano.

NOTES:

1. Arthur Canter and Rachel Joselson, Liner notes, *The Songs of Arthur Honegger and Jacques Leguerney*. Rachel Joselson, Réne Lecuona, piano. Albany Records, TROY691, 2004.
2. Harry Halbreich, trans. Roger Nichols, *Arthur Honegger* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1999), 165.

JACQUES LEGUERNEY (1906-1997)

Most of Jacques Leguerney’s sixty-eight *mélodies* were composed and published from 1940 to 1964. Many were commissioned and premiered by French baritone Gérard Souzay, his sister, soprano Geneviève Touraine, and pianist Jacqueline Bonneau. Early songs are comparable in mood and style with Ravel or Roussel (who encouraged Leguerney’s composition); later songs have been compared to those of his contemporary, Poulenc. Leguerney writes virtuoso piano parts—often dramatic, and with such an individual sense of harmonic style and color that Pierre Bernac reportedly described them as “*mélodies de pianist*.”¹ When asked about Leguerney’s songs, Gérard Souzay wrote, “How does one describe this music which is, at the same time, classic and modern? It is pure, but colorfully nuanced; it speaks to the heart as well as the mind—at times calm at times witty—wise, yet sensual...”²

Many of Leguerney’s songs deal with themes of love and nature, expressing a huge range of emotions from deeply felt meditation to wild, ribald humor. Leguerney stopped composing in 1964, and his songs became neglected. The quality of Leguerney’s text setting, lyrical beauty, and harmonic innovations all call for his songs to be better known and more widely performed.

Jacques Leguerney was drawn to the work of Renaissance poets, notably Ronsard. There are eight collections titled *Poèmes de la Pléaïde*, representing settings of sixteenth and seventeenth-century French poetry and totaling thirty-two songs. Additionally, there are cycles and other collections [for a complete listing of Leguerney’s songs, see Dibbern, Kimball, and Choukroun,

Interpreting the Songs of Jacques Leguerney].³ They may be thought of as the last in the great mainstream of twentieth-century French song.

La Caverne d'Écho (1954)

from *Poèmes de la Pléiade*, Volume 7

poem by Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant (1594-1661)

Dedication: Josiane and Jean Cier. First performance: Bernard Kruysen, baritone; Jean-Charles Richard, pianist. 29 May 1965, Radio France Culture. Marc-Antoine Girard, *sieur* de Saint-Amant, wrote poetry of great descriptive power, and his use of language set him apart from the other seventeenth-century poets. He was also an adept musician and skillful lute player, writing verses that often describe musical sounds linked to visual images. The poem takes place in a dark cave, home of the nymph, Echo; it is a charmed place, absolutely still and peaceful. The poet's lute resounds inside the cavern as he tries to soothe the inconsolable Echo, who mourns for her lover Narcissus. Leguerney creates the grotto's mysterious resonance with bitonality. Piano figures illustrate the strumming of the lute. The text contains many sounds with the consonant "r." The rolling quality of this speech sonority re-creates the cavern's resonance. The closing measures of the *mélodie* produce a striking effect as the singer's voice echoes eerily in the cavern, blending with the piano's resonance and creating a remarkably realistic echo.

À son page (1944)

from *Poèmes de la Pléiade*, Volume 2

poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)

Dedicated to Gérard Souzay. First performance: Gérard Souzay, baritone; Jacqueline Robin (Bonneau). 3 May 1945, Salle Gaveau, Paris. This is a lusty scene with four characters: a nobleman tipsy from drink, his page, and two women, Jeanne and Barbe. *Carpe diem* is the theme here. The singer philosophizes on this idea while enjoying his wine and the tender companionship of the two beautiful women. Leguerney evokes the crackling staccato of a stylized harpsichord with rhythmic accents in the piano. The text is brilliantly set with jagged vocal lines and driving rhythms that illustrate the singer's intoxication. It ends with Leguerney's repetition of the last poetic line and the addition of nonsense syllables which fit beautifully into the imagery and mood of Ronsard's colorful characters.

Je me lamente (1943)

from *Poèmes de la Pléiade*, Volume 1

poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)

Dedicated to Geneviève Touraine. First performance: Paul Derenne, tenor; Jeanne Blancard, pianist. 29 March 1944, Salle de l'École Normale de Musique, Paris. This is one of Leguerney's most beautiful songs, setting Pierre de Ronsard's text from his collection of love poems for Marie Dupin, a country girl from a small village in southern France. She was half his age and probably represented the youth he constantly pursued. It has been suggested that the Marie in question was probably Marie de Clèves, passionately adored by Henri III.⁴ Leguerney called this *mélodie* a constant *crescendo* from beginning to end.⁵ Ronsard's anguish is captured with a texture of stark chords, crowned by a regal and sustained vocal line. As the song progresses, the

poet's anguish is embodied in a more expansive texture, bidding Marie a happy resting place near God or in the Elysian fields.

NOTES:

1. Liner notes by Mary Dibbern. *Mémoires sur poèmes de la Renaissance* (Jacques Leguerney). Harmonia Mundi France. LP recording HMC 1171.
2. Letter to the author. Quoted in Mary Dibbern, Carol Kimball, and Patrick Choukroun. *Interpreting the Songs of Jacques Leguerney* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2001), 3.
3. *Ibid.*, 289-295.
4. *Ibid.*, 69. See note 20.
5. *Ibid.*, 70.

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908-1992)

Olivier Messiaen was born in 1908 in Avignon, France, into a literary family. He grew up around words and absorbed their shapes, colors and sounds naturally. His father, Pierre Messiaen, was a well-known translator of Shakespeare, and his mother, Cécile Sauvage, was a poet. As a youngster, before beginning to compose music, he had an especially perceptive ear attuned to the unique prosody of the French language. Early in his compositional career, he published a book titled *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944). About his musical setting of words, Jane Manning observes:

...the syllables themselves create a glittering mosaic of sonorities and subtle resonances, in addition to their actual meaning (many of the poems do not translate at all satisfactorily). The composer's awareness of the minutiae of verbal enunciations and articulations is miraculous. Each vocal sound can be precisely placed as intended, all dynamics are scrupulously plotted, and the performer's involvement and intimate connection to the music is enhanced by the sensual nature of words projection...¹

He often used stained glass to explain his music. When viewed from a distance, the myriad details blend into a single entity, whose purpose is to dazzle the listener. Understanding is not necessary, *feeling* is the prime requisite. The music of Olivier Messiaen is a skillfully designed and unique language, with meaning and form kept separate. Its meaning is unchangeable, harkening back to Gregorian chant, culminating in instruments that are able to prolong sound (organ, strings, or the *ondes Martenot*).

Messiaen's musical language is defined by its rhythms and tone colors. His uncanny instinct for associating sound with color produced works unique in their concept of the combination of sounds. He said that when he heard or read music, his mind's eye saw colors that move with the music; he sensed these colors, and at times he precisely indicated their arrangements in his scores. His fascination with birdsong was lifelong; he referred to himself as an ornithologist and tracked birds and their songs all over the world. He considered their resonances as songs and not merely sounds. He notated these on manuscript paper and they found their way into his music.

Trois mélodies (1930)

poems by Olivier Messiaen, Cécile Sauvage (1883-1927)

This little cycle of songs is Messiaen's first recognized work for voice and piano. The songs are modest in length and not typical of Messiaen's later style, but show influences of late Fauré and Duparc in the overall musical texture. There is only one song in his vocal compositions in which Messiaen set the poetry of another poet. It is found in this cycle, which uses the text of his mother, the poet Cécile Sauvage, who died three years before the composition of this work.

The three movements form a warm and delicate little triptych. Two of Messiaen's own poems stand on either side of the poem by Cécile Sauvage, throwing that charming little poem into high relief. "**Pourquoi?**" introduces a litany of the pleasures of nature: birdsong, the unfolding seasons, and water images. The poet becomes emotional, asking why all these bring him no joy. "**La Sourire,**" the shortest song of the set, is a beautiful microcosm of intimate and spiritual understanding between two people. It is a delicate example of musical economy and word setting in a quasi-recitative style. The last song, "**La fiancée perdue,**" offers fleeting hints of Messiaen's cycle to come, *Poèmes pour Mi*—most specifically, the final song. Here, the poet prays for divine blessing on the soul of the "fiancée" in the title. The fervent incantation illuminates and affirms man's connection to a higher authority.

Examining the poetic content of the three texts, we are struck by the images that underlie the words: the emotional outburst "pourquoi," (why?), perhaps questioning the death of Cécile, followed by Cécile's tender affirmation of love, and finally, the prayer asking for Divine grace and the blessing of the soul of the departed.

NOTES:

1. Jane Manning, "The Songs and Song Cycles," in *The Messiaen Companion*, ed. Peter Hill (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1995), 107.

DARIUS MILHAUD (1892-1974)

Darius Milhaud was probably the most prolific composer of the group known as *Les Six* (Francis Poulenc, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric, and Milhaud). The group was unified by friendship rather than a single musical style. Championed by influential writer Jean Cocteau and composer Erik Satie, *Les Six* often presented their works at the same concerts and met with great regularity—often at Milhaud's house—to make music and exchange ideas. Louis Durey observed that it was the wide diversity in their personalities and musical styles that gave the group its rich depth and permitted its development. Embodied in the credo of their musical thought was relative sparseness of texture and clarity.

Turn-of-the-century France offered popular entertainments that drew the French to an environment of merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, outdoor concerts, circuses, and a jumble of excitement. Milhaud was fascinated by Parisian street life, and could hear the sounds of the Montmartre fair from his apartment. Often on their group outings, *Les Six* went together to the Cirque de Médrano to see the Fratellinis, a famous family of clowns of that day. Milhaud observed that their acts were worthy of the *Commedia dell'arte*.¹

Trois Poèmes de Jean Cocteau, Op. 59 (1920)

poems by Jean Cocteau (1889-1963)

Trois poèmes de Jean Cocteau is like lyric fragments. The small-range vocal lines have a sparse lyricism—one of emotional mood rather than overt melody. The little *mélodies* are skillful studies in brevity. These match Cocteau's rather enigmatic poems that exemplify the style termed *dépouillé* (stripped to the essentials), his aesthetic creed. Milhaud dedicated the songs to Satie. The three miniatures are a colorful kaleidoscope of the circus and the outdoor fairs that entranced the French during this period. “**Fumée**” describes the equestrienne of the Cirque Médrano atop a horse, jumping through hoops, captured in Toulouse-Lautrec's familiar painting titled “L'Écuyère au Cirque Fernando (1888); “**Fête de Bordeaux**” is a description of the merry-go-round at the Bordeaux fair; and “**Fête de Montmartre**” evokes the nighttime boats and sailors, possibly having to do with a game involving camouflaged ships found at the Montmartre fair. Milhaud infuses stylistic and melodic elements of folk songs and children's tunes into the tiny pieces, tying the innate excitement of these popular destinations to simple, childlike reactions.

NOTES:

1. Laurence Davies, *The Gallic Muse* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1967), 164.

FRANCIS POULENC (1899-1963)

Francis Poulenc's 150 *mélodies* form the largest body of songs to be added to French vocal literature in the twentieth century. Poulenc's flair for the dramatic, combined with his superb skill in mixing poetry and music, produced songs that singers find immensely gratifying, not only for their musical value, but for their heightened sense of drama. Poulenc's *mélodies* reflect concern and feeling for declamation, inflection, breathing, and above all, show extraordinary warmth of feeling for the human voice. He was fond of saying, “J'aime la voix humaine!”

The sophistication of Poulenc's songs spring from their poetic inspirations. Poulenc was quite knowledgeable about poetry, and chose his texts carefully. His gift of divining the inner life of the texts he set produced songs that do more than merely illustrate the poems. His gift for melody is at the very heart of all his songs and seems to assert itself naturally in shaping the color, weight, and meaning of the texts he set.

Ce doux petit visage (1938)

poem by Paul Éluard (1895-1952)

Paul Eluard was one of Poulenc's three main poets. This is a beautiful introduction to Eluard's poetry, lyrical and passionately intense. The simplicity of Poulenc's setting allows the poem to shine. It is one of Poulenc's tiny gems, and he admitted his partiality to the short song. Eluard's skill at evoking nostalgia and melancholy are seen here, linked to lost youth.

The *mélodie* is dedicated to the memory of Raymonde Linossier, Poulenc's most intimate childhood friend, who influenced his literary taste and musical tendencies. He said: “I have a great liking for this short song. Raymonde Linossier was my best advisor for the music of my

youth. How many times, during the years since her death, I would have liked to have had her opinion on this or the other of my works.”¹

La Grenouillère (1938)

poem by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

“La Grenouillère” is an outstanding example of Poulenc’s romantic lyricism. This is a text by Guillaume Apollinaire describing the Ile de Croissy, an island in the Seine on the outskirts of Paris, frequented by artists and their models, and celebrated in paintings by Monet, Manet, and Renoir. “The Froggery” was a restaurant on the island. The overall images of happy days that cannot be relived can be seen in Pierre Auguste Renoir’s paintings *Les Déjeuner des canotiers* (The Boatman’s Luncheon), or *La Grenouillère*.

In this lament for boating parties on the Seine, vocal phrases are sustained and languid, floating over a slowly rocking piano accompaniment. The lazy piano figures mirror the empty tethered boats rocking on the water, bumping against each other, and give expression to the sweet melancholy of the poet’s words.

Montparnasse (1945)

poem by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

Apollinaire’s poem is dated 1912. Poulenc writes in his journal of songs that it took him four years to complete “Montparnasse,” almost phrase by phrase, and that he had no regrets about the length of time it took because “it is one of my best songs.”² It is a sentimental and heartfelt tribute to Paris. Both Apollinaire and Poulenc loved the city and it played a continuing role in their work.

“Montparnasse” is about the idyllic artistic existence lived at the edge of Paris. Poulenc wrote in his diary: “Let us imagine this Montparnasse all at once discovered by Picasso, Braque, Modigliani, Apollinaire.”³ The *mélodie* has a carefree nonchalance about it; it is not sad, but thoughtful—a beautiful blend of poetic and musical lyricism. Poulenc’s vocal and harmonic textures are full of surprising harmonic details that bind this song—which he composed in fragments—together into a touching and expressive picture of Paris in the early years of the twentieth century.

Bleuet (1939)

poem by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

Guillaume Apollinaire was one of Poulenc’s preferred poets. This is a wartime poem that Apollinaire penned in 1917 in Paris in convalescence after a head injury; both Apollinaire and Poulenc served in World War II. There are several word plays at work here. “Bleuet” was the nickname for French soldiers in World War I, because their uniforms were blue, like the color of a little cornflower, which is a “bleuet.” Also, “Un bleu” was the term used for a raw recruit. “Bleuet” is one of Poulenc’s most moving songs—agonizing in its emotional content yet noble in its message. It is a quiet and private moment in which a twenty-year-old boy who does not yet know all that life can be, is characterized—and addressed—by the poet in a sweetly serious

speech. Poulenc wrote that for him, the key to the poem were the words, “It is five o’clock and you would know how to die.”⁴ This song is simple, intimate, and poignant.

Les Chemins de l’amour (1940)

poem by Jean Anouilh (1910-1987)

Poulenc composed this *valse chantée* as incidental music for *Léocadia*, a play by Jean Anouilh. Within the play, the song was described as a pseudo Viennese waltz, and functioned as a *leitmotiv* in the plot. Sung by Yvonne Printemps, one of France’s most celebrated musical theatre stars, “Les Chemins de l’amour” became a popular success. It embodies the relaxed elegance of a self-styled Viennese waltz style, encased in one of Poulenc’s haunting melodies.

Banalités (1940)

poems by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

Banalités is not a cycle, but a group of five songs. The poems have no connection with each other; however, their order provides a well-constructed recital group. They may be performed separately. The work is one of Poulenc’s most popular vocal works, and deservedly so.

Poulenc chose contrasting poems, placing them so that the collection begins briskly and ends with lyrical gravity. “**Chanson d’Orkenise**” is Poulenc’s title for the poem contained in the strange mixture of prose and poetry that Apollinaire called *Onirocritique*. Orkenise is a road in Autun leading to the Roman gate of the same name. The musical setting has the feeling of a popular folk song. The narrator sings of a tramp leaving the city and a carter who is entering it—one leaving his heart there, one bringing his heart to be married. There is a word in the poem with a double meaning: “*grise*” can be translated as “gray” or “tipsy.” The merry quality of the song opens the set with gaiety, but both Apollinaire and Poulenc offer a little food for thought.

“**Hôtel**” is a poem that immediately represented for Poulenc a hotel room in Montparnasse, where the idle poet wants only to bask in the sun’s warmth and smoke. Pierre Bernac referred to it as “the laziest song ever written.”⁵ The piano figures are fashioned of Poulenc’s luxuriant chromatic harmonies, stacked as if to cushion the lethargy of the singer.

“**Fagnes de Wallonie**” is set in the gloomy, desolate uplands of the Ardennes with a terrain of vast heaths, twisted trees, and peat bogs, swept by winds of considerable force. Its gloomy setting complements the melancholy mood of the poet. Poulenc’s spiky musical setting is a whirlwind that sweeps from beginning to end in a turbulent texture that demands precise articulation from singer and pianist.

Sandwiched between Songs 3 and 5 is a tiny *bonbon*, “**Voyage à Paris.**” It resembles a little commercial jingle about Paris—“which one day love must have created”—an invitation to the pleasures of that beautiful city, away from “the dreary countryside.” Poulenc sprinkles his quicksilver setting—a *valse-musette*—with indications of “*amiable*” and “*avec charme*.” The composer referred to it as having “deliciously stupid lines...Anything that concerns Paris I approach with tears in my eyes and my head full of music.”⁶

The cycle concludes with “**Sanglots**”, one of Apollinaire’s finest poems about the universality of lost love, a theme that Poulenc matches with exquisite modulations in a setting that embodies the essence of the words. The vocal lines are eloquently lyrical. The poem is difficult to understand because of the juxtaposition of the main narrative and the interior “asides,” that in effect form a poem within a poem.⁷ The song has an elegant serenity that culminates in a stunning climactic point at the words: “Est mort d’amour ou c’est tout comme/ Est mort d’amour et le voici.” The ending lines of the song sustain the profoundly calm mood, bringing *Banalités* to its close.

La Courte Paille (1960)

poems by Maurice Carême (1899-1978)

The last song cycle Poulenc composed was *La Courte paille*, on seven poems of Belgian poet Maurice Carême. Poulenc composed the songs for soprano Denise Duval, creator of leading roles in his three operas, hoping that she would sing them to her young son. Poulenc considered the *mélodies* very poetic and whimsical; unfortunately, Duval disliked the music and never did sing the cycle.

Poulenc asked Carême to provide an overall title for the work and requested permission to change the titles of several selected poems: the original title of “Quelle aventure!” is “Une puce et l’éléphant”; “Le Reine de cœur” is “Vitres de lune”; “Le carafon” is “La carafe et le carafon.” For the cycle’s title, Carême chose *La Courte Paille* (The Short Straw), referring to drawing lots by the method of a short straw. Poulenc was delighted, saying the title symbolized his little musical game exactly. He also wrote in his diary, “They must be sung tenderly; that is the surest way to touch the heart of a child.”⁸

The cycle is full of child-like innocence, whimsy and imagination, with a few shadowy undertones. The first song, “**Le Sommeil**,” is a beautiful lullaby to a restless child who cannot go to sleep, tossing and turning in his small bed. He seems ill, crying and perspiring, but hopefully will finally surrender to slumber. In “**Quelle aventure!**” the child describes an absurd happening: he saw a flea driving a carriage with a small elephant in it. The story grows more bizarre but the rhythmic pace never wavers, careening to the end of the song when the child wonders *how on earth* he’ll ever be able to persuade “Mama” that it really happened. The verses are witty, yet the shrieks of “Mon Dieu!” are laced with a feeling of childish terror. “**La Reine du cœur**” is a beautiful, languid melody that paints a picture of the mysterious Queen of Hearts, beckoning to visitors from her frosty castle, where she reigns over a court of lovers, including the young dead. In “**Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu...**,” the child is chided “on all sides” about studying. The title of the song presents the French vowels, and the text contains words that make their plural with an “x” (“pou, chou, genou, hibou”). The formidable cat of the poem’s opening lines is none other than that tricky feline Puss-in-Boots! The entire song is a little tongue-twister, an exercise in diction and accuracy. “**Les anges musiciens**” are none other than the school children staying home on Thursday, the half-day school holiday in France in Poulenc’s time, practicing Mozart on their harps, just like good little angel musicians should do. “**Le carafon**” is a crazy little story of a carafe that longs for a baby carafe (*carafon*) just like the giraffe at the zoo, who has a *girafon*. This is a ridiculous rhyming game like those that children love to play. The text is full of whimsical characters: the carafe, a giraffe, a sorcerer astride a phonograph, Merlin, and finally, a *carafon*. “**Lune d’Avril**” is another lullaby, very slow and otherworldly, which serves as an

epilogue. Bound together in a musical texture that features a syncopated pedal point, it is filled with enchanted images the child wishes to dream about: a land of joy, light, and flowers where all guns are silent. The ending leaves the listener suspended in a mood of unfinished magic.

La Courte Paille is the last vocal music Poulenc composed.

NOTES:

1. Quoted in Pierre Bernac, *Francis Poulenc: The Man and his Songs* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1977), 125.
2. Francis Poulenc, *Journal de mes mélodies*, trans. Winifred Radford (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), 75.
3. *Ibid.*, 75.
4. *Ibid.*, 57.
5. Bernac, 72.
6. Poulenc, 67.
7. The English translation of “Sanglots” has parentheses that delineate the “asides” so that both “poems” may be seen. These may be found in Pierre Bernac’s books *Francis Poulenc: The Man and his Songs*, page 75, or *The Interpretation of French Song*, pages 284-85.
8. Poulenc, 109.

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

The songs of Maurice Ravel represent a transition between the mature *mélodies* of Debussy and the vocal literature that followed, notably the songs of *Les Six*. Debussy dominated the French musical scene from the turn of the century until his death in 1918. It was Ravel who was regarded as the leading musical spokesman for France following World War I. He was a skillful craftsman and his songs have a sense of evenness of rhythmic structure and flow that call for scrupulous execution. The fusion of music and text into a logical whole was of utmost importance to him. He composed elegant and subtle *mélodies*, using classical phrase structure. His melodic phrases often tend toward modality. His songs range from those with a folk-like style to more to those that are more speech-like, and those that encompass a melodic romanticism. He was precise in his thought and his scoring, and scrupulous in his musical execution. His music encompassed some of the fascinating influences of the post-Wagnerian era. Ravel’s musical contributions were of utmost importance to this exciting and new era in French cultural history. He made notable contributions to musical literature for the piano, the French art song, opera, chamber music, orchestral literature, and the ballet.

Sur l’herbe (1907)

poem by Paul Verlaine (1833-1896)

This *mélodie* is Ravel’s only setting of Verlaine. It has often been suggested that this poem was probably inspired by Watteau’s painting *L’île enchantée*. There is also a reference to a famous eighteenth-century dancer, Marie-Anne Cuppi, known as (La) Camargo, who was immortalized on canvas by the painter Nicolas Lancret.

The scene is an outside gathering, elegant and artificial. A number of people are there, chief among them, a licentious abbé, slightly tipsy from a bit too much Cyprian wine. He exchanges a few disconnected gallantries with the ladies—innocent conversations on the surface, but sensuous in undertone. The conversation is disconnected; we do not know exactly who is speaking. Ravel shapes very flexible vocal phrases, in keeping with the abbé's intoxicated state, underscored with graceful piano figures that evoke an eighteenth-century dance. In a letter to Jean-Aubrey, Ravel commented on "Sur l'herbe": "In this piece, as in the *Histoires naturelles*, the impression must be given that one is almost not singing. A bit of preciousness is found there which is indicated moreover by the text and the music."¹

Noël des jouets (1905)

poem by the composer

This is the only solo song for which Ravel wrote the text. It describes a Christmas manger scene, replete with the Virgin and Christ-child, animals, and angels. It embodies Ravel's delight with tiny mechanical toys and figures, and his fascination with the unspoiled world of child-like experience.

His genius for text painting is displayed in the delightful *mélodie*. The mechanical toys come to life in the piano figures. Ravel's charming text creates the images around and over the *crèche*, with not a word wasted. Ravel commented that the music is "clear and plain, like the mechanical toys of the poem."² This little song foreshadows other Ravel settings of make-believe, beginning with the song cycle *Histoires naturelles* and culminating with his opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*. The music of menacing dog Belzébuth foreshadows the music of the Beast in the Mother Goose Suite (*Ma Mère l'Oye*).

Rêves (1927)

poem by Léon-Paul Fargue (1876-1947)

The poetry of Léon-Paul Fargue has been described as reflecting the union of dream and memory. This *mélodie* has a tender lyricism within a sparse musical texture. The text is fashioned of a series of miniature images that pass by rather quickly, unrelated, like the images found in dreams. For all their differences, they have a simplicity about them that seems timeless, existing together, as the poet says, "in a vague countryside." When the dreamer finally awakens, the little fleeting pictures "die quietly." The piano postlude perpetuates the dream state, creating an ethereal little microcosm that continues to draw the dreamer to it.

Ronsard à son âme (1924)

poem by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585)

In his *Abrégé de l'art poétique français* (1565) Pierre de Ronsard advocated the union of poetry and music, and Renaissance composers frequently set his poems.³ In this strikingly simple *mélodie*, Ronsard speaks to his soul, calling it by a series of diminutives: little soul, dainty little one, sweet little one. Ravel uses a series of parallel fifths in the piano figures to invoke a Renaissance mood. This is Ronsard's last poem, and Ravel's last adaptation of Renaissance

poetry. Ravel's setting recalls the elegance of his early *mélodie*, "D'Anne qui me jecta de la neige," to a poem of Clément Marot.

Manteau de fleurs (1903)

poem by Paul Barthélemy Jeulin (1863-1936)

The poem notes everything in the garden that is pink—all the flowers that will become a beautiful cloak to complement the beauty of the lady of the poem. Ravel usually had very sophisticated taste in choosing texts; this particular poem is an unusual choice. It is a simple text, somewhat banal, but Ravel's shimmering musical texture imparts a dramatic character for each flower in the poem. The overall piano texture suggests orchestral colors. The last section of the *mélodie* changes course slightly, with the piano harmonies creating a slightly wistful mood. Clearly, Ravel lavished a beautiful musical setting on a rather ordinary set of words.

Don Quichotte à Dulcinée (1932-33) [Medium/Low Voice edition only]

poems by Paul Morand (1888-1976)

This miniature cycle was Ravel's last vocal work. His musical portrait of the noble Spanish knight, Don Quixote, is embodied in three *mélodies*, all based on characteristic Spanish or Basque dance rhythms: (1) the *guajira*, alternating 6/8 and 3/4 meter; (2) the *zorzica*, a Basque dance in quintuple meter; and (3) the *jota*, a lively triple-metered Spanish dance.

"**Chanson Romanesque**" presents the chivalrous idealist Don Quixote, confidently promising to rearrange everything in nature to his lady Dulcinea's liking in order to win her favor. Dulcinea is in reality a poor farm girl, but the Don's illusion will not be shaken. He remains authoritative and focused in his quest for her love. "**Chanson épique**" is Quixote's reverent prayer to Saint Michael and Saint George, beseeching them to bless his sword and his Lady. Ravel creates a beautifully sustained and prayerful vocal line over a simple accompaniment. "**Chanson à boire**" is an exuberant drinking song. Although the Don's tippling has made him overly boisterous, he never oversteps the bounds of his noble bearing. His robust laughter is heard in the piano figures and even a hiccup intrudes between "lorsque j'ai" and "lorsque j'ai bu."

NOTES:

1. Maurice Ravel, in a letter to Jean-Aubrey written in September, 1907. Quoted in Arbie Orenstein, *Ravel: Man and Musician* (New York: Dover Publications, 1991), 165-66.
2. Quoted in Orenstein, 161.
3. Orenstein, 192.

ALBERT ROUSSEL (1869-1937)

In 1894 Albert Roussel left a highly successful career as a naval officer to pursue music. After completing his studies, he became professor of counterpoint at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. Satie and Varèse were among his students.

Roussel was one of the most prominent French composers of the interwar period. He composed almost forty *mélodies* as well as chamber music, ballets, and operas. His style is eclectic but highly individual. Early works show the influence of Vincent d'Indy, works dating from 1910 to 1920 exhibit influences of Debussy and Ravel, but he turned to neoclassicism in his later compositions. His love for the sea was almost a spiritual attraction and continued to influence his music throughout his career. He had a fascination for distant places; his extended tour of Southeast Asia in 1909 had a tremendous influence on his composition.

“**Sarabande**” and “**Cœur en péril**” are *mélodies* to texts of René Chalupt, a close friend. They are found in op. 20 and 50, respectively. Roussel’s overall musical catalogue is not extensive, but its quality is of an extremely high level, and his vocal writing in particular contains some *mélodies* of great delicacy and style, squarely in the French tradition.

For Roussel, the word held primacy in his *mélodies*, being both transformed by its musical setting and merging with it to create a perfect union. Commenting on the quality of Roussel’s songs, composer Charles Koechlin is quoted as saying: “The sense of austerity pervading them, stemming simply from the composer’s natural reserve, heightens their expressiveness and further embellishes them; in language and content they are absolutely personal. This collection of songs is one which will last because its essence is undying sensitivity.”¹

Sarabande (1919)

from *Deux mélodies*, Op. 20, No. 2
poem by René Chalupt

This is surely one of Roussel’s most delicate and magical creations. His writing for the piano is particularly outstanding, placing Chalupt’s poem in an overall texture of elegance and veiled sensuality. There is an Oriental delicacy in Roussel’s musical evocation of the fluttering doves, feathers drifting into a pool, and the gentle drift of chestnut blossoms onto bare flesh.

Cœur en péril (1933-34)

from *Deux mélodies*, Op. 50, No. 1
poem by René Chalupt

This *mélodie* is much different in mood—witty and flirtatious. It is the narrative of a young man eager to convince his ladylove of his fidelity. Vocal phrases are tuneful, with a spirited piano texture of Iberian flavor.

NOTES:

1. Liner notes, Dom Angelico Surchamp, trans. Elisabeth Carroll, *Roussel Mélodies*, Colette Alliot-Lugaz, Mady Mesplé, Kurt Ollmann, José Van Dam; Dalton Baldwin, Patrick Gallois. EMI Digital. CDS 7492712, 1987.

ERIK SATIE (1866-1925)

Erik Satie wrote very few songs and most of them date from late in his life. The eccentric father figure of the French *avant-garde* of the twentieth century had a wildly independent spirit that found its way into his musical compositions. Throughout his life, he kept a great deal of childlike

inquisitiveness and innocence. He was a curious personality of unconventional habits whose sense of the absurd and whimsy permeated both his life and his music. Quintessential Satie compositions are laconic and witty.

It was Satie who named *Les Nouveaux Jeunes*, soon known as *Les Six*, and influenced the early development of the group.

La Statue de bronze (1916)

from *Trois Mélodies*

poem by Léon-Paul Fargue (1876-1947)

This is Satie's first setting of the poetry of Léon-Paul Fargue, the "Bohemian poet of Paris." Satie used Fargue's witty verses again for *Ludions*. The scene is a garden game—the *jeu de tonneau*. A bronze frog, perched atop a cabinet with numbered chambers, grows impatient of being the target of the game where metal disks are tossed into her mouth. She dreams of being freed from her pedestal and being able to use her wide-open mouth to utter "LE MOT." ¹ She wants to be free to join the other frogs gathered near the rust-colored washhouse "blowing musical bubbles from the soapy moonlight." But the game continues, the disks rattle through her mouth into numbered compartments and at night, insects sleep in her mouth. This *mélodie* can be linked musically to "La Grenouille américaine," found in *Ludions*. Both songs share piano figures derived from the *café-concert chanson*.

Ludions (1923)

poems by Léon-Paul Fargue (1876-1947)

Ludions is the last of Satie's purely vocal works, composed two years before his death, and is perhaps his finest set of songs. It epitomizes his lifelong quest for musical simplicity and his irreverence for the intricate compositional techniques and overactive emotions of the Impressionists.

Ludions is translated as "bottle imps" (a *ludion* is a little figure suspended in a hollow ball, which descends or rises in a vase filled with water when one presses down on the elastic membrane covering the mouth of the vase). The cycle is a kaleidoscopic set of musical miniatures, riddled with puns and illogical phrases. Fargue's nonsensical verse complements Satie's musical aesthetic, and the two friends' personalities closely matched one another. All the *mélodies* in *Ludions* are short, like tiny cameos. They are colorful, saucy, fantastic, and defy translation. "Air du rat," "La Grenouille américaine," and "Chanson du chat" are right out of the music hall, and Satie uses with a mock-serious "tongue-in-cheek" treatment for "Spleen" and "Air du poète."

Je te veux (1902)

poem by Henry Pacory (1873-?)

The *valse chantée*, or sung waltz was a favorite of the *café concerts*, for which Satie composed a number of works. *Café concerts* were a form of Parisian popular entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The all-musical programs were held outside; French

popular singers presented repertoire that catered to lower and middle-class audiences who came to talk, eat, drink, and observe the long informal programs, for which there was no admission charge. “Je te veux” was composed for Paulette Darty, dubbed “the Queen of the slow waltz.” It was one of her signature musical presentations for the *caf’conc* (*café concerts*), and one that Darty remained associated with throughout her career. A statuesque blonde with an ample figure, Darty was a commanding performer who kept the most boisterous of the Saturday night audiences enthralled. Lyricist Henry Pacory’s rather explicit poem was watered down at Satie’s request before the song was published.

La Diva de l’Empire (1904)

poem by Charles Bessat, named Numa Blès (1871-1917)

The “Diva de l’Empire,”² one of Satie’s *café-concert* songs, was another work written for and performed by Paulette Darty. It was composed for a Bonnaud-Blès music-hall revue called *Dévidons la Bobine* (Let’s Unwind the Bobbin) that toured several seaside resort towns. The British “diva” is a femme fatale performer who enchants all who see her. The song is a syncopated cakewalk describing her seductive beauty as she struts her stuff “showing the wiggling of her legs and some pretty frilly underwear.” Interspersed at points along the way with English words: Greenaway, baby, little girl, etc. The piano provides a jaunty ragtime rhythm throughout that melds perfectly with the suggestive text.

NOTES:

1. “Le mot” has a double meaning. It was the title of a broadsheet published by Jean Cocteau between 1914-15 and is short for “*le mot de Cambronne*,” a polite way of saying “*merde*.” Cambronne was a famous French general who replied “*Merde!*” when asked to surrender. In Steven Moore Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian: From Cabaret to Concert Hall*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43.
2. Empire refers to the Empire Theatre of Varieties, Leicester Square, London.

DÉODAT DE SÉVERAC (1872-1921)

Déodat de Séverac, of aristocratic lineage, was born in the Languedoc region of southwest France in Saint-Félix-Caraman (now Saint-Félix Lauragais), near Toulouse. After studies in Paris with Vincent d’Indy at the Schola Cantorum, he returned home and remained there. He was a contemporary of Fauré, Debussy and Ravel, but was considered a *petit maître* in their company, possibly because of his return to Languedoc at the completion of his musical studies.

Séverac composed piano and orchestral music, operas and songs. The culture of his native Languedoc figured prominently in his music, which is highly descriptive. He often wrote parts for regional folk music in his scores. Many considered him provincial and unsophisticated, but his music displays his skill in integrating folk elements—and often, regional folk instruments—of his native Languedoc into his works. He often referred to himself as “the peasant musician.” Influences of Debussy, Mussorgsky, and Bizet may be found in his *mélodies*. Although his music is rather conservative in style, Séverac fused folk elements with the musical styles of the day in a unique and individual manner.

Ma poupée chérie (1914)

poem by the composer

Composed in 1914 (and published in 1916) for his daughter Magali and dedicated to her, this little cradlesong is probably de Séverac's best loved and most performed *mélodie*. Séverac's fresh musical setting contains just the right combination of simplicity and delightful childlike honesty. Despite the subject matter, the composer's heartfelt poem avoids an overly cloying atmosphere.

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