

SANDRINE PIAU

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INTERMISSION

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Hébé

Le charme

Sérénade

ERNEST CHAUSSON

Born January 20, 1855, Paris

Died June 10, 1899, Limay

Ernest Chausson is one of the most painful examples of what-might-have-been in the history of music. Born into a wealthy and educated family, Chausson came to music indirectly. He was an accomplished painter and art collector, but his parents wanted him to do something “sensible,” so he took degrees in law and was admitted to the bar in Paris at age 22. But he never practiced, choosing instead to pursue a career in music. Chausson studied with César Franck (he was one of that master’s final students) and found himself caught between the chromaticism of Franck, the seductive influence of Wagner, and the radical music of his friend Debussy. He wrote a handful of pieces that have found their way into the repertory—the *Poème* for violin and orchestra and the *Chanson perpétuelle* for soprano—but the promise of these pieces was cut short. In the summer of 1899, Chausson and his family took a vacation house in Limay, about twenty miles northwest of Paris. His wife and five children were returning from a day trip to Paris, and Chausson got on a bicycle to meet them at the station. Along the way, he lost control of the bicycle, was thrown headfirst into a stone wall, and—in those days before bicycle helmets—was killed instantly. He was 44 years old.

This recital opens with three of Chausson’s earliest songs, and all three are marked by the restraint, elegance, and beauty that mark his best music. The first two are from his *Sept mélodies*, composed while Chausson was still in his twenties. Hebe was the goddess of youth in Greek mythology, and the text of *Hébé*, by the French poet Louise-Victorine Ackermann, is a brief but powerful meditation on the passage of time: Hebe passes by, filling the youths’ cups with the nectar of life, and then she vanishes, never to return. Chausson subtitles his setting “Greek song in the Phrygian mode”—a concise setting, it ends quietly but powerfully. *Le charme*, on a text by Armand Silvestre, is about the curious ways we fall in love. The song flows gently along its *Moderato con moto* tempo—so smooth is Chausson’s setting that we do not realize how often the meter switches between 4/4 and 2/4 to accommodate the rhythm of the poem. *Sérénade*, one of Chausson’s *Quatre mélodies* of 1887, offers a rather more direct expression of love. The quiet piano accompaniment—subdued and chromatic—sets the mood instantly, and this understated song trails off to its *pianissimo* conclusion.

Neue Liebe
Nachtlied
Hexenlied (Andres Maierenlied)
FELIX MENDELSSOHN
Born February 3, 1809, Hamburg
Died November 4, 1847, Leipzig

Mendelssohn wrote slightly over a hundred songs, and he conceived of the form somewhat differently than did his contemporaries. In contrast to Schubert, whose songs are often through-composed and depend for their effect on a subtle interplay between voice and piano, Mendelssohn preferred the strophic song, in which the voice's melodic line was central, the piano's role subordinate. And Mendelssohn had a different conception of how songs should be presented to the public. His friend Schumann, for example, wrote songs in cycles, unified sometimes by a particular subject and sometimes around the work of one poet; for Schumann, an individual song was very often part of a larger whole. By contrast, Mendelssohn preferred to write songs individually—he might write a song for a particular occasion, for a particular singer, or because he happened to be attracted to a particular text. Eventually he would gather these songs—which had sometimes been composed over a great period of time—and publish them in groups of six. After his death, his family and friends continued to gather and publish these songs in groups of six.

This recital offers three of Mendelssohn's songs, composed over the span of twenty years: he composed one of these songs while still a teenager, another only weeks before his death. *Neue Liebe* (1833) takes a familiar situation, a horse galloping through the forest at night, but this song has none of the horror of Schubert's *Erlkönig*. Instead, it sparkles with a sense of magic and mystery and finally propels us to the question in the final two lines of Heine's poem. Mendelssohn composed *Nachtlied* on October 1, 1847, only thirty-four days before his death and at a moment when he was reeling from the sudden death of his sister Fanny. Eichendorff's text traces the day's slow descent into night, and Mendelssohn's softly-syncopated introduction sets the mood perfectly. The song rises to its climax as the poem pledges to praise God through the dark night, then falls away to a *pianissimo* close. Mendelssohn wrote *Hexenlied* while he was still a teenager in Berlin, and it was published in 1827, when he was only eighteen. The vision of night here—as the setting for a witches' sabbath—is quite different from the preceding song's use

of night as the setting for a moral quest. *Hexenlied* is lots of fun. The teenaged composer marks it *Allegro vivace*, and the music races along its 6/8 meter as glimpses of billygoats, broomsticks, lightning, and fiery sparks flash past in the darkness. This is a strophic song, and the piano accompaniment is particularly effective, either murmuring darkly in the background or hammering the song along its way.

La courte paille

FRANCIS POULENC

Born January 7, 1899, Paris

Died January 30, 1963, Paris

Francis Poulenc wrote songs throughout his career. His first dates from the World War I years, when he was still a teenager, and his final set of songs, *La courte paille*, comes from 1960, three years before his death. As might be expected, Poulenc turned to quite different sources for his texts than the German texts favored by Schubert and Brahms,

La courte paille (“The Short Straw”) is a set of children’s songs written for Poulenc’s friend Denise Duval to sing to her baby son. These seven songs are all on very brief texts by the Belgian Maurice Carême, who often wrote poetry for children—these songs are about children or children’s perceptions (or about adults’ perceptions of children). They range in mood from extremely gentle, lullaby-like songs (*La reine de coeur* and *Lune d’Avril*) to songs that are nearly manic in their non-stop energy (*Quelle aventure!*, *Le carafon*, and the patter-song *Ba, Be, Bi, Bo, Bu . . .*). Throughout, Poulenc offers detailed instructions to her performers, including careful directions to the pianist to use the pedal liberally. He counsels at different points: “in a halo of pedal,” “in a cloud of pedal,” “bathed in pedal.” By contrast, the fast songs are all marked *très sec*: “very dry.”

Nacht

Schilflied

Nachtigall

ALBAN BERG

Born February 9, 1885, Vienna

Died December 24, 1935, Vienna

As a young man, Alban Berg was drawn to both music and poetry, and he actually considered becoming a poet before he became a composer. This passion for language and music

led him to compose a large number of songs while still in his teens and early twenties, a time when he had virtually no formal musical training. The number of these songs, composed between 1901 and 1908, is somewhere between 80 and 150, and Berg—as he grew older—put them away and wished them suppressed. But two decades later, in 1928, Berg returned to these early songs. He was now a far different composer from the awkward young man who had written these songs (by 1928 he had composed *Wozzeck* and the *Lyric Suite*), but he recognized the merit of some of these early efforts. He selected seven songs from the years 1905-08 (composed during the first years of his study with Schoenberg), arranged them for solo voice and orchestra, and published both the orchestral and piano versions.

Though not planned as a cycle, the *Seven Early Songs* are all in some way about night. Yet the night of Berg's songs is not the night of terror, goblins, or madness. It is instead a time of reflection, of rest, of love, and these seven poems suffuse a mood of peace and ecstasy and—most often—wonder. These are late-romantic topics, and Berg's musical idiom is also late-romantic: these are lyric settings—melodic, soaring, expansive, and often rich in harmony. Yet at moments one senses—despite the influences—music that is looking ahead rather than back, particularly in some harmonic experiments and episodes of what might almost be termed an expressionistic intensity.

This recital offers the first three of the *Seven Early Songs*. The opening *Nacht*, with its whole-tone scales and great romantic climaxes, was one of the last to be composed, and it makes a stirring introduction to the set. By contrast, *Schilflied* (“Song amid the Reeds”) is subdued, rustling quietly as it presents its message of sorrow, loneliness, and longing. One of the earliest in the set to be composed, *Die Nachtigall* shows the influence of Brahms—it sets the work of Theodor Storm, a poet whose work Brahms also set, and it even repeats its first stanza in full.

Nuit d'étoiles

Romance (L'âme évaporée)

Fleurs des blés

Zéphyr

Beau soir

CLAUDE DEBUSSY

Born August 22, 1862, Saint-Germain-en-Laye

Died March 25, 1918, Paris

Debussy studied at the Paris Conservatory from 1872 until 1884, and it appears to have

been a match made in hell. The convention-bound Conservatory had little use for the rebellious young man, and that feeling was distinctly mutual. During his final years there, Debussy became friends with the wealthy and cultivated Vasnier family in Paris and essentially moved in with them. He could read and compose in peace at their elegant home, where his attention was soon drawn to the attractive Madame Marie-Blanche Vasnier, a talented amateur singer. Debussy fell in love with her and wrote a number of songs specifically with her high, clear voice in mind. While reading in the extensive Vasnier library, he discovered many of the poets who would be important to him throughout his career, including Paul Verlaine and Stephan Mallarmé. All of Debussy's songs on this recital were composed very early in his career—with one exception, they were all written while he was still a teenager.

Nuit d'étoiles, composed in 1880 on a poem by Theodore de Banville, is a meditation on lost loves, made beneath the starry skies; the lengthy refrain gives the song its title. Debussy composed his *Deux romances* in 1891, some years after he had left the Conservatory, and both songs set short poems of Paul Bourget. Like *Nuit d'étoiles*, *L'âme évaporée* is a meditation on lost love, but this a much more subtle song: Debussy evokes that vanished passion in music of an almost chaste understatement.

Fleurs des blés, composed in 1880, is a straightforward lovesong: the fields of golden grain and blue cornflowers remind the poet of his love, and the rippling accompaniment suggests not only the grain waving in the breeze, but the poet's own ardor. After all this breathless energy, the poised conclusion is perfect.

The brief *Zéphyr*, composed in 1881 on a text by Banville, is a somewhat more explicit lovesong: the breeze becomes the metaphor for the poet's desire. Much of the vocal writing here is set very high, perhaps a nod to Mme. Vasnier's high range.

Beau Soir has become one of Debussy's most famous songs, and it has been heard in a number of arrangements. The song is usually dated from about 1882-83, though it may have been written earlier. It offers what seems at first a conventional situation, a calm meditation at sunset, but the final line leads us in an entirely different direction; Debussy's music reflects this sudden change very subtly.

Mädchenblumen, Opus 22
RICHARD STRAUSS
Born June 11, 1864, Munich

Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

The spring of 1888 was a propitious moment for Richard Strauss, then only 24 years old: he was just about to begin composing his mighty tone poem *Don Juan*, music that would all at once make him famous and expand the entire conception of what the tone poem might be. Just before beginning work on the violent *Don Juan*, however, Strauss composed a cycle of four gentle songs that he titled *Mädchenblumen*, or “Maiden-Flowers.” All four set texts by the German historical novelist and poet Felix Dahn (1834-1912), and in these brief poems Dahn associates four flowers—cornflower, poppy, ivy, and water-lily—with a specific personality type.

Dahn associated the blue cornflower with those blue-eyed women who suffuse calm from their “pure souls.” Strauss marks his setting *Andante*, and *Kornblumen* sets Dahn’s text steadily and gracefully. By contrast, brilliantly-red poppies (*Mohnblumen*) are full of energy and happy to be alive. Strauss marks the song *Allegro giocoso* (“fast, happy”), and it zips along breathlessly, powered by trills in the piano accompaniment. The mood changes sharply with *Epheu*—for Dahn, ivy symbolized the maiden of soft words, born to twine around another life. Strauss’ smooth vocal line glides above the piano’s climbing arpeggios, which finally bring this song to its quiet close. The cycle concludes with *Wasserrose* (“Water-Lily”), a flower that Dahn finds silent and mysterious—it blooms only at night and communicates only with the stars. This is the longest song in *Mädchenblumen*, and Strauss’ setting is unusual: it begins with both hands of the piano accompaniment high above the voice and eventually builds to a climax that is at once radiant, heartfelt, and shimmering.

Hôtel

Voyage à Paris

Sanglots

Les chemins de l’amour

FRANCIS POULENC

Born January 7, 1899, Paris

Died January 30, 1963, Paris

This recital concludes with four songs by Francis Poulenc, all composed in 1940 during the German occupation of France. The first three are from *Banalités*, a cycle of five songs on texts by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918). Apollinaire (born Wilhelm Kostrowicki) was a French poet, critic, and novelist who coined the term “surrealism”; he was wounded in World

War I and died during the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918. Poulenc had met Appollinaire while the composer was a very young man, and the poet remained one of his favorite writers: Poulenc set a number of texts by Appollinaire and also used his play *Les mamelles de Tirésias* as the basis for an opera in 1945.

The first two songs make a sharp contrast. *Hôtel* is a mood-piece in which the poet sits languidly in a hotel room and considers lighting his cigarette from the shaft of sunlight coming through the window. Poulenc marks the song *Très calme et paresseux*: “Very calm and lazy.” By contrast, *Voyage à Paris* is all motion and energy. In waltz-rhythm, it tells of the poet’s excitement about leaving the dull countryside for a visit to the City of Light.

Sanglots (“Sobs”) is the final—and most serious—song in *Banalités*. The text is intense (does it reflect Poulenc’s feelings about this dark moment in French history?), but the opening is deceptive—Poulenc repeatedly reminds the performers that this music should be *très calme* and *très doux*. Gradually the tensions in the text drive the song to a sharp climax before the song falls away to its unsettling close.

In 1940 Poulenc was asked to write incidental music for a production in Paris of Jean Anouilh’s comedy *Léocadia*, which had been written only the year before. All of Poulenc’s music for that production has vanished with the exception of the song *Les chemins de l’amour*, which has become one of his most popular. This is a gorgeous song, with the vocal line soaring and shimmering above a very active piano accompaniment—it is no surprise that *Les chemins de l’amour* has become a great favorite of sopranos or that it has been frequently recorded.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger