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## **Bantry and Beyond**

***Festival Echoes***

### **17. L'Amour**

Filmed at the Voces8 Studio, Church of St Anne and St Agnes, London

**Rachel Kelly** [mezzo-soprano]

**Fiachra Garvey** [piano]

**Debussy**

*Chansons de Bilitis*

**Berlioz**

*Nuits d'été*

**Ravel**

*Shéhérazade*

**Claude Debussy** [1862-1918]

***Chansons de Bilitis*** [1897]

1. *La flûte de Pan*
2. *La chevelure*
3. *Le Tombeau des Naiades*

Pierre Louÿs [1870-1925] was a Belgian-born French poet, novelist and photographer of erotic subjects. One of his greatest publishing successes was *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (The Songs of Bilitis), one hundred and forty three prose poems which he claimed he had translated from a recently discovered ancient Greek text by a poetess called Bilitis, an associate of Sappho. They caused quite a sensation at the time for their eroticism and antique sensuality but it was soon discovered they were fakes from the pen of Louÿs himself; however this did not affect their popularity at that time. He was one of Debussy's closest friends, they even planned an opera together at one stage, and the composer chose three of the poems for this 1897 sequence. Later he would write *Six Épigrapes antiques* [1914] for piano duet to accompany the reading of a number of the Bilitis poems. At first Debussy resisted having the songs sung in public but they finally were performed by Blanch Marot at the Société Nationale on March 17th 1900.

The songs are declamatory to match the prose-poem originals. The first, *Pan's Flute*, will stir up memories of the great *Prélude à l'Après Midi d'un faune* of 1894, though the music bears little resemblance. There is a touching innocence in the setting, probably tongue-in-cheek, while the frogs gurgle delightfully on the piano at the end. The second song *The tresses of hair* is more directly erotic, rising to a splendid musical climax before sinking into a quiet recollection of the dream. The final song *The tomb of the Naiads* is a gentler anecdote with a charming short postlude.

*Ian Fox*

**Hector Berlioz** [1803-1869]***Les Nuits d'Été Op.7*** [1840-1841]

1. *Villanelle*
2. *Le spectre de la rose*
3. *Sur les lagunes*
4. *Absence*
5. *Au cimetière (Clair de Lune)*
6. *L'île inconnue*

The origins of this incomparable song cycle are unclear, despite the many sources available on Berlioz, including his own prolific writings. Unusually for Berlioz, the years 1840-1842 are poorly documented and have been called his mystery years, even though he was busy throughout the period. Information on *Les Nuits d'Été* is particularly thin. A manuscript copy of the opening song *Villanelle* is dated March 23rd 1840 and two songs, *Absence* and *Le spectre de la rose*, were scheduled for a concert in November 1840, though in the end they were withdrawn. The cycle began as four songs with the other two added later. The full set was published in the middle of 1841. Later the Swiss publisher Rieter-Biedermann commissioned Berlioz to orchestrate the songs. His friend, the poet and critic Théophile Gautier [1811-1872], had written the verses, published in 1838. These were difficult times for the composer: his marriage to Limerick actress Harriet Smithson was breaking up and he was beginning a relationship with Spanish/French singer Maria Recio, who performed some of the songs but there is no evidence of any direct connection between the music and his personal life.

The cycle begins with a *Villanelle*, (*Allegretto*) – an old strophic Neapolitan song format. Berlioz exhibits a magically light touch, both vocally and in the accompaniment. It is followed by the longest of the songs, *Le spectre de la rose* (*Adagio un poco lento e dolce assai*), this is a reflection in an operatic style on the short life of a rose worn at the previous night's ball. The mood of passionate yearning is conjured up with great skill. *Sur les lagunes* (*Andantino*) was also set by Fauré, and is subtitled *Lament*. It is a nocturnal *barcarolle*, as the poet bewails the death of his beloved. Maria was a frequent singer of *Absence* (*Adagio*); possibly the finest song in the set, it is treated quite simply but with great soul and its spine-tingling *pianissimo* repetitions of *Reviens* stay long in the mind. The fifth song *Au cimetière* (*Clair de Lune*) is set in a moonlit graveyard (*Andantino non troppo lento*) and Berlioz maintains his nocturnal mood, employing unusual harmonies to create an ethereal atmosphere. The cycle ends in a more up-beat mood with the *Unknown Island* (*Allegro spiritoso*) as the poet yearns to visit the elusive island where love is eternal.

*Ian Fox*

**Maurice Ravel** [1875-1937]**Shéhérazade** [1903] Poems by Tristan Klingsor

1. *Asie*
2. *La Flûte enchantée*
3. *L'indifférent*

Over twenty years after composing *Shéhérazade* Ravel told a student: 'In some years from now, you will have learned everything about composition, but there is something that is impossible to keep, and that is the freshness of youth. And you have to regret it all your life.' And the student asked: 'What would be the freshness of youth you have lost?' And Ravel responded: '*Shéhérazade*. It is full of things that I am ashamed today to have written. But there is something in this composition that I have never found again.'

*Shéhérazade* and his String Quartet were Ravel's breakthrough works that confirmed he was a composer who could no longer be ignored by the old guard at the Paris Conservatoire. The poet, Tristan Klingsor (the nom de plume of Léon Leclère) was a member of the Apaches, an exclusive group of young composers, musicians and poets who met to perform each other's works. Klingsor's collection was inspired by the clever storyteller of the Arabian Nights. It was a time when the Orient was in the air, an imaginary Orient far from reality, like the journey the singer takes in the first song *Asie*. Ravel was clearly drawn to the exoticism and rhythmic freedom of Klingsor's poetry and quickly wrote these three bright, brilliant and finely harmonised songs. They conjure a voluptuous Orient, filled with intoxicating perfumes, a sensual world where youth and beauty, desire and regret feverishly intermingle.

*Asie* is like a journey through the One Thousand and One Nights, a gallery of adventures that get more and more improbably exotic, whose interest lies in the telling. The long narration is linked by the repeated declamation *Je voudrais voir* all these places and sights in the picture book before me – the excitement is in the telling and the flowering of imagination. *La Flûte enchantée* is a tale of unfulfilled desire, where the notes from the beloved's song fly through the window *comme un mystérieux baiser*. The narrator in the final song does not even get a kiss, just a graceful farewell gesture and lightly swaying hips. The air is full of the regret of lost youth.

*Francis Humphrys*

*Thank you for watching*

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