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Katherine Bergeron. *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2010. 424 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 10: 0195337050.

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Everything changed for Wallace Fowlie in seventh-grade French, owing to “strange vowel sounds.” “It was the discovery in me of a new region, not merely new muscles in my throat and tongue, but an entirely unfamiliar ethos in which my whole being participated. To reproduce the sounds correctly, I knew that I would have to focus and concentrate all my body on them....During those first two years, when I did not know the language, and to some degree ever since, everything about French seemed enchanted to me and quite distinct from all I had learned about life. Each word I learned to say had its mystery and its charm, which were enhanced by the strangeness of the sound and the ever so slight hesitation I always made over its meaning. The music of a word was apprehended a bit prior to its meaning. Music and meaning became dissociated as two separate experiences, and I consented to their dissociation in favor of music. Pleasure in the music of a word liberated me somewhat from the need of understanding it completely. I preferred to be hypnotized by the sound of French rather than stimulated by its meaning. Each word stood alone and was assessed by me for its value in euphony, for the power it possessed as incantation. What it actually stood for was of secondary importance.”[1]

I imagine that every second-language francophone who has come to love French song, the singer in particular, has experienced some version of that story. All of us have tried to reason out why the explanation for our favorite passages of French music-with-text seem to find a sonic perfection attained nowhere else: moments in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, for instance, or the folds of Debussy’s “L’Éventail,” or, one might suggest, the wordless chorus in the sunrise of *Daphnis et Chloé*.

Katherine Bergeron, who likewise first came to the language in American high school, here seeks in French song of the Belle Époque what the texts might actually stand for. The intriguing word *mélodie* had simply cropped up in the music of Berlioz in part, for some, as simply a nuanced translation of “Lied,” in part its aesthetic opposite.[2] The words “elusive” and “reticent” are typically attached to the genre, a world, says Daniel Albright in the jacket blurb, “of invisible flutes and half-heard voices, the general ravish.” Bergeron’s notion is that in 1905, as Fauré became director of the Conservatoire, Third Republic aspirations for a standard tongue began to coalesce with currents in music, writing, education, and scientific inquiry in favor of a kind of music-poetry where the *voix parlée* fused with singing, where neither was mistress of the other, where “literature” and “expression” were liberated, opened to “plain talk” and “the unpretentious accent of the people.” And a fleeting moment it was at that, finished, like everything else, with the artistic and political events of 1913–1914.

The five long chapters begin with a close reading of Fauré’s *Chanson d’Eve*, composed between 1905 and 1910 to ten poems selected from Charles van Lerberghe’s book of the same title. Eve, who herself begins at the beginning, stands as a figurehead for Fauré’s plan to integrate the

singing of Lieder into the curriculum at the Conservatoire. (For chronological reference: Fauré's most familiar Verlaine settings--the Venetian songs "Mandoline," "En sourdine," et cetera--come from 1891; *La Bonne Chanson*, from 1894.) The second chapter connects *mélodie* to speech and the study of phonetics in the wake of the Jules Ferry Laws on educational reform, which established mandatory public education, free, secular, and in French--a response, in large measure, to societal limitations revealed by the Franco-Prussian War and Commune. (The Alliance Française, established 1883, was also a product of this line of thought). Chapters three and four consider how new approaches toward the sound and meaning of poetry were absorbed into music composition and then, most interestingly, into the profession of singing: "language in performance," as Bergeron has it, in the subtitle of chapter four. The concluding chapter, "Farewell to an Idea," returns to critique of the sort we encountered with *Eve* in order to understand how these developments played out elsewhere: in Debussy's *Fêtes galantes* (1904), Ravel's aviary *Histoires naturelles* (1906), the Mallarmé settings of both Ravel and Debussy (both 1913, by coincidence). The study draws to an end with Fauré's *Mirages* (1919), after Debussy was gone and during the hiatus between Ravel's Mallarmé songs and his end-of-career *Ronsard à son âme* and the *Chansons madécasses*.

The cast of characters, so extensive that I have tried to summarize a portion in the table below, goes well beyond the three central composers (Fauré, Debussy, Ravel) and four poets (Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud). Among the savants, we encounter Berlioz's friend and biographer, Ernest Legouvé (and also another Berlioz biographer, Julien Tiersot, owing to his work on the *chanson populaire*), Ferdinand Brunot and his Archive de La Parole, the abbé Pierre Rousselot. The singers of primary interest to Bergeron are Jane Bathori, Claire Croiza, and Mary Garden.

"Oubliez, je vous prie, que vous êtes chanteurs!" Debussy tells the cast of *Pelléas*. Meanwhile the eighty-one year-old Mme Viardot asks Reynaldo Hahn, "Do you really like the vapid manner in which your songs are sung? And is it necessary to have that pointed diction?" Hahn imagined that if the words were well spoken, the art would necessarily follow--though since he smoked while playing and singing, his own results are dubious. For the recorded Archive de la Parole, Sarah Bernhardt speech-sings "Un Évangile" by François Coppée with such pitch and metric precision that Bergeron is able to compose a *mélodie* with piano beneath the recording (p. 212).

Bergeron's commentary is limpid, well crafted, at ease with the multiple vocabularies in play (musicological, linguistic, literary- and social-theoretical). Her affection for the material is catching. A conversational tone in first-person voice keeps us well oriented as to her intent and the trajectory of her thought. Sometimes the language seems contrived for effect ("foul-mouthed fowl") or uncomfortably colloquial ("a whole slew of," "a humorist rag," "caught some flack"). More often she gets to the truth of the matter with haunting beauty. "*Je dis: une fleur!* Between colon and exclamation point lies a taut, stretched space, on which another kind of flower will blossom: a poem" (p. 139).

It's all here: reading and speaking and listening and teaching; fowl and fauns and fans; diction, *dire, diseur; vers, vert, ver*. Reed flutes and their scales. Perfume. Alexandrines and sonnets. The mysterious concept of timbre. The singer's technical world of breath and fleshy organs. Mute *e*'s and Parisian *r*'s. Bergeron's treatment of the *r grasseyé ou parisienne*, the crude, deformed *r*, is especially attractive even if the noise is not (pp. 195-198), since the "French way of saying *r*" is a central problem of singing in the language.

Which brings us to Roland Barthes and his Grain of the Voice, the title of a 1972 essay.[3] The formulation has a nice ring to it and for that reason has enjoyed a life of its own, assimilated into the literature of less lofty pursuits than *mélodie* ("He's talking about the funk, man!"[4]). But

specifically Barthes lamented what he thought to be the loss of the pure style of Charles Panzéra (1896–1976), the Franco-Swiss baritone best remembered today from early recordings as Méphistophélès in Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust* and as Pelléas in Debussy’s opera. Comparing the manners of Panzéra and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Barthes found the latter over-dramatized with breath, the lines over-expressed, while Panzéra’s vowels and diction brought the greater truth of the language. (“I only listen to [Fischer-Dieskau’s] lungs, never his tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mouth or the nose. On the contrary, all the art of Panzéra is in the letters and not in the breath.”) The “grain” he placed at the moment the language reaches the instrument of its saying, the voice. In a later essay he dismisses Gérard Souzay, whose “melodramatic” delivery he equates with other “historic acquisitions of the bourgeoisie”: “phonetic pointillism” that amounts to “excessive expression of a word, clumsily meant to inject a parasitical intellectual order into the seamless fabric of the song.”[5]

To read Barthes on performers at work is to be reminded of the common pronouncements of aging *mélomanes* in their remembrance of things past. “Well, it’s come down a lot since Ormandy,” sniffed an intellectual music-lover after a trademark *Fantastique* by the Philadelphia in 2007, during which I had been thinking exactly the opposite: how does that familiar sound get transmitted down through generations of players and conductors? Barthes, who studied briefly from Panzéra, is nostalgic for a bygone era as he remembers it, a *bon vieux temps* before the indisputables of stereo, back when singers let the text speak for itself. But in fact the values I hear in Souzay’s accounts of this literature place him squarely in the style of Panzéra (accompanied by his wife, Magdeleine Baillot) and Bathori...and to some extent of the author herself (compare the last song of the *Chanson d’Eve*, “O poussière, mort des étoiles,” in the recordings of Bergeron and of Souzay). And what I fondly remember from ten weeks spent with Souzay in his sixties was exactly the telling of these very poems in the manner Barthes appears to favor: the sound of the language unmannered in its diction and exquisitely subtle of inflection, delivered with the barest hint of physical gesture. One felt enveloped first by the sound of the words, and then by meaning—seldom, if ever, by the singer.

A companion website includes nineteen musical examples in streaming audio: the ten songs of *La Chanson d’Eve* as performed by the author and Dana Gooley, piano, at Brown University in June 2009; three *mélodies* sung by Jane Bathori (1877–1970) in 1929; Reynaldo Hahn singing and playing in 1930 (long after he was the darling of the salons); and several demonstration tracks including the familiar 1913 recording of Guillaume Apollinaire reading “Le Pont Mirabeau” and the Sarah Bernhardt recitation. The musical examples are cued in the printed text by a curiously illegible speaker-and-waves icon. The printed musical examples most often connect into a complete or near-complete song, resulting in a kind of in-text anthology. For instance, examples 1.19 to 1.23 together comprise the whole of “O mort, poussière d’étoiles,” and 5.18 to 5.20, the whole of “Surgi de la croupe et du bond,” from Ravel’s *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*. To refresh the memory, I also purchased a dozen or so tracks of Fauré and Debussy from commercial vendors online, downloaded a number of scores from IMSLP (the International Music Score Library Project), and kept YouTube open: a very good place to compare, for instance, Panzéra and Souzay in “L’Invitation au voyage.” (Note, at the top, the *rs* in “sœur” and “douceur.”) To have all this available anywhere on the planet—in my case, in the countryside a few kilometers from Monet’s lily pads—seems a singular advance in how we write and read musicology.

In addition to nearly one hundred musical examples, there are some fifteen graphic illustrations, mostly facsimiles from treatises on phonetics. The running text embraces dozens of poems and their extracts in the original French (or, in some instances, their phonetic renderings), with English translations following. The potential for error in laying out material of this complexity is great but, for the most part, the production decisions and typography contribute to an

effortless literary flow. Some exceptions: the line-break conventions for the English translations (/ and //) seem inconsistently handled, and on p. 15 incomprehensible; occasionally the English translations miss, to my mind, a word or two; and the author's annotations to the musical texts can be hard to parse (the curving arrows in ex. 5.17, for instance, which I take to suggest the silent peacock "right at the end of our pole" in the kingfisher episode of Ravel's *Histoires naturelles*). When orchestral instruments at last make their appearance in the musical examples, the proofreading could be better. (Example 4.12: p. 236, from p. 32 of the full score of *Pelléas*, lacks the horn transposition--F--and gets the clef wrong in bar 2; for that matter the treatment of clefs in bassoons and horns in this example is too fussy, since bass clefs at the start would be fine. Similarly the transpositions need specifying in exs. 4.9 and 4.14 to 4.16. Academic publishers need to get serious about their flats and sharps, too: here the flats occupy greatly too much horizontal space, such that the formulation "G<flatsign> minor ninth" is all but unrecognizable; the only sharp sign is not a sharp at all, but rather a hash mark (also known as a number sign or pound sign).

These passing infelicities are the price of so rich a treatment of signs and symbols. *Voice Lessons* works well: one reads text, examines the pictures, studies printed score, and hears the historic and modern sounds all at once, cross-referencing at will. On the fly, I was going to say: but rather the pace is that of the swan's glide or faun's musing. For the mind frequently wanders to connections unmade: as to *vers parlés*, passages in *Les Nuits d'été*, notably the epitaph in "Le Spectre de la rose," and the Willow Song scene in *Otello*; as to letter reading, *Werther* and *Eugene Onegin*. *Pierrot lunaire* is finally introduced (in conjunction with Ravel's visit to Switzerland in 1913), but not the lovers of *Verklärte Nacht*, so like those of "Colloque sentimental." There are swans aplenty in this text, but not Saint-Saëns'. He makes a single appearance, at the very end and without his diacritic. Further afield there are Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolittle, Philomel finding her vowels and consonants, the uncanny resemblance of the cover illustration of Fauré's *Eve* to the raven-haired heroine of *The Mikado*. (Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who played Mélisande to Sarah Bernhardt's Pelléas in 1904, created the role of Eliza Dolittle.) I wonder if we can really hear the faun in the accompaniment motive at the end of "Danseuse" from *Mirages* (p. 334), or the Tristan chord in bar 22 of "La Flûte de Pan" from the *Chansons de Bilitis* (p. 168). Can the Dreyfus Affair really have much to do with these how these composers composed? The sympathetic answer is that of "Colloque sentimental": a non-committal *c'est possible*.

Voice Lessons thus ends up a long read, but for the right reason. We are consistently invited back into these delicious texts, to listen and respond again, and in other ways--to Eve, for instance, dying in silence. (Rousseau: "People no more die singing than do swans.") The moral of Katherine Bergeron's tale, being troublesome, demands attention, for in the *mélodie*, she believes, Fauré and Debussy and the others have "learned to tone down melody, making their song a dying breath, and their singers virtually mute: 'almost voiceless,' as Debussy would write. And it was in the act of silencing that they, like the poets, dared to set song free" (p. 177).

APPENDIX

Dramatis Personae summarized (in chronological order by birthdate)

Composers

Jules Massenet (1842–1912)
Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924)
Claude Debussy (1862–1918)
Reynaldo Hahn (1874–1947)
Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Poets / Writers

Leconte de Lisle (1818–94)
Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867)
Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98)
Paul Verlaine (1844–96)
Arthur Rimbaud (1855–91)
Charles van Lerberghe (1861–1907)
Jules Renard (1862–1910)
Pierre Louÿs (1870–1925)
Marcel Proust (1871–1922)
Paul Valéry (1871–1945)
Baroness Renée de Brimont (1880–1943)

Phoneticians / Linguists / Scholars

Ernest Legouvé (1807–1903)
Ferdinand Buisson (1841–1932)
Jean-Pierre Rousset (1846–1924)
Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)
Julien Tiersot (1857–1936)
Ferdinand Brunot (1860–1938)
Robert de Souza (1865–1946)

Singers

Jean de Reszke (1850–1925)
Mary Garden (1874–1967)
Jane Bathori (1877–1970)
Claire Croiza (1882–1947)
Maggie Teyte (1888–1976)
Charles Panzéra (1896–1976)

NOTES

[1] Wallace Fowlie, *Journey of Rehearsals: A Memoir* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977), pp. 14–15.

[2] Hector Berlioz, *9 Mélodies imitées de l'anglais (Irish Melodies)*, H. 38 (Paris: Schlesinger, 1830).

[3] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in Steven Heath, ed., *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 179–189. See also Jonathan Dunsby, "Roland Barthes and the Grain of Panzéra's Voice," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 134(2009):113–132.

[4] Daniel Hunsaker Hawkins, "Who Needs Roland Barthes When You've Got Louis Armstrong?" Hawkins blog, quoting Anthony Coleman, entry of 4 February 2011. www.danielhhawkins.com/1/category/roland%20barthes/1.html.

[5] Barthes, "The Bourgeois Art of Song," in Richard Howard, ed., *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 119–122.

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