

Date du récital/Date of recital: *September 28, 2019*

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These program notes are written by the student performing, and are presented by the student in partial fulfillment of the requirements of their course.

The program of this recital is one that is very much focused on character. Each piece has a clear and distinct narrator, created through a melding of music and text. In many pieces, the voice of the composer and poet is mixed with that of the protagonist of the song. Nevertheless, each piece and cycle in this program struck me as having a very distinct voice and personality, with a story to be told. In the Bizet songs, I hear a voice of a well traveled, arrogant man, who despite his gallivanting mannerisms, has moments of softness and humility. In the Schubert, Goethe's Gretchen is brought to life through passionate and later heartbreak Schubert melodies and harmonies. In the Walton, the listener encounters not only the eccentricities of poet Edith Wharton, but also characters from her own life. And finally, in *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, Ernest Chausson creates a symphonic landscape of warmth and brilliance to tell a tragic love story.

Story telling is not a unique idea in giving a recital – all singing should be about communicating with an audience to move and share something with them. But in this recital, I made the decision to bring the character of every piece to life as one would with a role in an opera; to set them in a greater context, with a full life, having made decisions that brought them to the moment in which we encounter them in the song.

Georges Bizet wrote *Ouvre ton cœur* in 1860, while he was still a student at the Paris Conservatory, as part of a symphonic ode called *Vasco da Gama*.¹ The piece was written for the character of a young officer and has the rhythm and tones of a Spanish dance.² It is from this original setting that I decided to flesh out the character of the narrator as a dashing officer, attempting to win the affection of a girl he likes. *Ouvre ton cœur* sees him in his younger days, a passionate man, relishing in the thrill of his attempted seduction, one which I believe is successful in the songs final triumphant “la la!”

¹ Macdonald, Hugh. "Bizet, Georges." In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000051829?rskey=NgknUI&result=1#omo-9781561592630-e-0000051829-div1-0000051829.1>

² Macdonald, Hugh. "Bizet, Georges." In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000051829?rskey=NgknUI&result=1#omo-9781561592630-e-0000051829-div1-0000051829.1>

Pastel, published posthumously in 1886,³ is a song that has no connection to *Ouvre ton coeur*, but I believe it can be heard in the voice of the same narrator. The officer is older now, with a more seasoned career. We are momentarily diverted from his more arrogant nature as the audience witnesses his being moved by a painting of a woman. In observing great art, the officer's thoughts are pure. He is taken aback by the beauty of the work and by the model's smile, and as he observes, he questions what it could be that she is smiling about. The officer is personally drawn by the work and feels as if this girl has awaited him alone. But the piece has a humble tone, with short rests and varying syncopated rhythms interrupting a melodic line, suggesting the officer doesn't entirely know what to say or do with himself in the face of such true beauty.

This moment of humility is nevertheless short lived, as we dive into the final selection by Bizet, *Adieux a Suzon*, a lively, galloping piece written by the composer in 1866.⁴ In this piece, the voice of the officer as a supercilious and confident womanizer returns, as he playfully sings to Suzon of the pain he feels in leaving her, but how must travel, “*bien loin, bien vite.*” The song has many twists and turns, and there are moments when we feel perhaps the officer’s pain in leaving Suzon is genuine, but the lively chorus soon returns, until the piece ends with a victorious gallop off to further adventure.

Schubert first read Goethe’s Faust as a young teenager, and was so moved by the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for youth and the ability to seduce the maiden Gretchen, that he wrote *Gretchen am Spinnrade* in 1814, at the age of 17.⁵ Pianist Graeme Johnson wrote about the song, “The most amazing thing is that a 17-year-old boy can somehow enter into the female psyche with such an incredible amount of understanding as if he himself had experienced such feelings.”⁶ Scholars have attributed the date of Schubert’s composition of *Gretchen am Spinnrade* as the beginning of the Romantic German lied.⁷ Indeed, this piece is the embodiment of German romanticism, with a dark, verging on psychotic undertone, as Gretchen repeatedly weaves her spinning wheel (articulated in the piano), singing of her obsessive love for Faust. One massive *mezza di voce* is heard throughout the song, as Gretchen becomes more and more distraught. Gretchen is a strong character, but she has been seduced through Faust by the

³ Ezust, Emily. “Pastel.” Lieder.net. Accessed September 7, 2019.

http://www.lieder.net/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=6187

⁴ “Adieux a Suzon » IMSLP Petrucci Music Library. Accessed September 7, 2019.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Adieux_%C3%A0_Suzon_\(Bizet%2C_Georges\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Adieux_%C3%A0_Suzon_(Bizet%2C_Georges))

⁵ Boker-Heil, Norbert, Fallows, David, Baron John H., Parsons, James, Sams, Erid, Johnson, Graham, and Griffiths, Paul. “Lied.” In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000016611?rskey=xRGO8q&result=7#omo-9781561592630-e-0000016611-div1-0000016611.3>

⁶ Huizenga, Tom. “After 200 Years, A Schubert Song Still Resonates.” NPR. Accessed September 7, 2019.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2014/10/19/352513546/after-200-years-a-schubert-song-still-resonates>

⁷ Boker-Heil, Norbert, Fallows, David, Baron John H., Parsons, James, Sams, Erid, Johnson, Graham, and Griffiths, Paul. “Lied.” In *Grove Music Online*. Oxford Music Online. Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000016611?rskey=xRGO8q&result=7#omo-9781561592630-e-0000016611-div1-0000016611.3>

devil himself. She is tragic in the true sense of the word – helpless and undeserving of the evil that befalls her.

In Goethe's poem, the scene on which *Gretchen am Spinnrade* is based occurs in the earlier days of her seduction by Faust. *Gretchen's Bitte* is her prayer after she has given in to him. Overwhelmed by her guilt, Gretchen goes to the church and prays to a statue of the Sorrowful Mother, stating that only Mary in her pain can understand Gretchen's misery. The song is heartbreakingly beautiful, especially in Schubert's descending chromatic bass line, as Gretchen cries "who can feel how insidiously the pain beats my bones? What my poor heart now dreads, how it trembles, what it craves."

Gretchen's Bitte was written in 1817, only a few years after *Gretchen am Spinnrade*, but it was never completed, and was only published after Schubert's death.⁸ Both songs are remarkable portrayals of a woman, with strong emotions and great passion, but who is doomed from the beginning.

From the tragic to the absurd, we now move to the poetry of Edith Sitwell, set by British composer William Walton in 1932. Sitwell was a larger than life woman, born to aristocratic British parents in 1887. She was a member of British literary society, and gathered poets, writers, and composers to her Parisian salon.⁹ Sitwell played with the sound of words, using onomatopoeia and the rhythm of the text to create her poetry. Walton was one of her protégés, and together they worked to create *Façade*, an almost Pierrot Lunaire-like musical recitation of Sitwell's poems. Three of those poems, Walton later reset in his 3 Songs.

Each song in this cycle has a distinct musical voice and story, but I chose to interpret the poems as if one observer is encountering three very different tales and characters in each song. The result is a fantastical journey through a type of wonderland, where an ordinary person is faced with three very extraordinary situations.

In the first song, the character encounters the Greek god Apollo. Apollo tells her the story of the Greek naiad Daphne, who he pursued after being cursed by Cupid. Daphne was eventually turned into a tree, only to become dried and withered in the summer months, and thus lose the lush freshness she possessed as a water nymph.

In the next song, our character meets 5 women, described in veiled terms as being "simian" in shape, flitting their fans, flirting, and never revealing who they really are. In a 1981 performance of *Façade*, opera director and coach Janet Bookspan claimed this song was about prostitutes entertaining each other in their spare time¹⁰, a description that I find apt, and that

⁸ "Gretchen im Zwinger." IMSLP Petrucci Music Library. Accessed September 7, 2019. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Gretchen_im_Zwinger,_D.564_\(Schubert,_Franz\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Gretchen_im_Zwinger,_D.564_(Schubert,_Franz))

⁹ Editors. "Edith Sitwell." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed September 7, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Edith-Sitwell>

¹⁰ Holland, Bernard, "Behind Edith Sitwell's 'Façade' at Jupiter Concert," *New York Times*, March 13, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/13/books/behind-edith-sitwell-s-facade-at-jupiter-concert.html>.

Walton illustrates through complex, flirting rhythms, and alternating dense and bare accompaniment.

The final song creates perhaps the most distinct character, one whom Sitwell based on the father of some of her childhood friends.¹¹ The song, with brilliantly descriptive language, illustrates a funny tall, stork-like man, who stalks the gardens around the children having tea with their nursery maids on the lawn of their mansion. The scene Sitwell paints is evocative, but not without its poetic eccentricities, and the rhythm of the language is picked up by Walton, who punctuates each line, perfectly capturing the spirit of our characters final interaction with another peculiar Sitwell creation.

The final part of this recital showcases the great song cycle by Ernest Chausson, *Poème de l'amour et de la mer*, with text by French poet Maurice Bouchor. *Poème* recounts the story of a lover as he returns to the scene of a mystical love affair with an otherworldly woman, and relives that episode of his life. The work consists of three parts, the middle one being a piano interlude. In the first part, the lover returns to the setting of his affait, a lush island in an ethereal world, and relives the moment he first met his love. The text is luxurious and sensual, as it describes the sights, sounds and smells of the island and its atmosphere. The lover sings to his love in the first part: « *toi, qui transfiguraient la jeunesse et l'amour, tu m'apparus alors comme l'âme des choses; mon cœur vola vers toi, tu le pris sans retour. Et du ciel entrouvert pleuvaient sur nous les roses.* »

But like so many other great musical love affairs, the story from the beginning is doomed. Soon after the lover encounters the object of his affection, things begin to change on the island. The sea becomes foreboding and the wind begins to moan. For no clear reason, the lover becomes overwhelmed with dread as he seems to realize that his love is unattainable. The woman may not die at the end, but the island is revealed to be one of ghosts, as the narrator sings, « *Les grands hêtres d'argent que la lune baisait étaient des spectres; moi, tout mon sang se glaçait en voyant mon aimée étrangement sourire.* »

The final part of the cycle is Chausson's famed chanson, *Le temps des lilas*, in which the lover seems to finally acknowledge the death of this dream world and its. Never again, sings the protagonist, will this world of lilacs and roses exist.

This recital was truly an exploration of characters, from Bizet's dashing officer, to Goethe's heroine Gretchen, to Walton's exploration of eccentric individuals, to the tragic lover of Chausson's *Poème*. Each character is fashioned through music and text, and I hope they will all be brought to life in some part through this performance.

¹¹ Sitwell, Edith. *Taken Care Of*. London: Bloomsbury Reader, 1965.