

Baudelaire, Fauré, Debussy, and the flowering of French mélodie

Roy Howat, with Jared Schwartz, February 18, 2015



Gabriel Fauré sketched in 1898,
by his friend John Singer Sargent



... and a self-portrait
around the same time

Quotation:

Does it matter that Verlaine's "En sourdine", set to music by Debussy among others, uses a 7-syllable meter rather than the more common 8-syllable or "octosyllable" and that all the rhymes are "masculine"? Does it help to know that in Sully Prudhomme's poem "Le long du quai", set to music by Fauré as "Les berceaux", the rhyme scheme changes in the third stanza? There are good reasons for believing it may.

First, poets such as Verlaine and Sully Prudhomme clearly took great pains over their versification and would have expected contemporary readers to notice the results. "En sourdine", for instance, is an exquisitely crafted poem that sends out strong messages through its formal structure about how it might be interpreted. An understanding of versification should allow us to approach the *mélodie* more creatively.

Second, among contemporary readers were the composers of the *mélodie* themselves, in general a highly literate group. Fauré, we know, won prizes for literary studies on two occasions during his years at the Niedermeyer school and was able to turn his hand to elegant light verse. Debussy, Chausson, Chabrier, and later Poulenc were all the friends and associates of leading contemporary poets. At the very least, one would expect such composers to have had a strong sense of how French poetry worked at a formal level and possible even to have reflected some of this understanding in their musical settings.

David Hunter: *Understanding French verse: A Guide for Singers*. New York: Oxford, 2005, pp. 3–4

Time line for Fauré relative to Baudelaire & Wagner

1861–1865, Paris: The Niedermeyer School's modern-new piano professor, Camille Saint-Saëns (still in his 20s), introduces his teenaged pupil Gabriel Fauré to 'dangerous' modern music – Chopin, Schumann ... and Wagner (whom Saint-Saëns knew personally)

August 1867: death of Charles Baudelaire, Wagner's most powerful champion in France

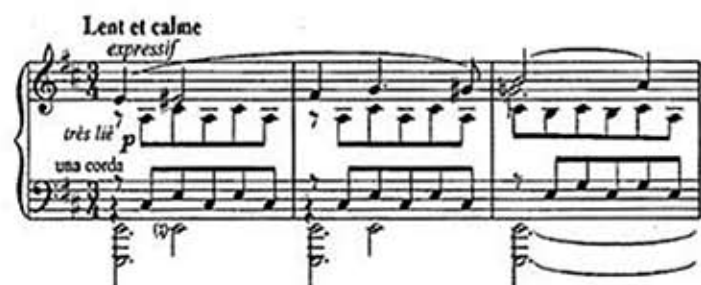
1870: Siege of Paris: first settings of Baudelaire (all at once) by 'serious' composers: Chabrier, Duparc & Fauré.

These songs irreversibly take the plunge from the older *romance* to the *mélodie* proper. Fauré's *Lydia* (1870, poem by Leconte de Lisle) lies on the cusp, as Fauré acknowledged in a letter.

c. 1871? Fauré completes his 3 songs to poems by Baudelaire, published separately over next 8 years, long dispersed across the traditional « First Collection » (Choudens-Hamelle)

« Hymne »	= love	(+ immortality)
« La Rançon »	= reason	(+ toil & sublimation)
« Chant d'automne »	= mortality	

Wagnerian echoes across Duparc & Fauré:



Duparc, *Extase* (1874)

"Irritated by critics obsessively accusing composers of 'Wagnerism', Duparc took pleasure in deliberately writing this song 'in the style of *Tristan*' "

(recounted by Pierre de Breville)

Fauré, *Hymne* (1870), start of 3rd stanza,
in medium-voice key

Fauré dedicated his Baudelaire setting "La Rançon" to Duparc.

Debussy's Baudelairean resonances (a sort of lifelong Leitmotif)

'Le Balcon':

- a) Baudelaire, 'Le Balcon', 1857, poem
- b) → song setting by Debussy, 1887–9: 'Le Balcon',
no. 1 of *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*
- c) → Debussy's last piano piece, 1917, "*Les soirs illuminés par l'ardeur du charbon*";
title (but not music) taken from above poem/song

'Harmonie du soir':

- a) piano piece, 1851, by Liszt: 'Harmonies [sic] du soir', no. 11 of *Etudes transcendantes*
- b) (?) → poem, 1857, by Baudelaire: 'Harmonie du soir' (1st edition of *Les fleurs du mal*)
- c) → song setting by Debussy, 1887–9: 'Harmonie du soir',
no. 2 of *Cinq poèmes de Charles Baudelaire*
- d) → piano piece, 1910, by Debussy: "*Les sons et les parfums tournent dans l'air du soir*"
(Preludes Book 1) – musically independent of the song but echoes his song
'Le Balcon'. Sequence of genre thus does a complete circle.

Souvenirs sans Regrets

(Suite)

Et voici la dolente mélodie de Villiers sur le beau sonnet de Bandelaire.

LA MORT DES AMANTS

moderato

Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs / égers des divans profonds comme des tani-
sant à l'envi leurs chœurs / et nos deux cœurs se font deux vases - flamme

Et d'étranges fleurs sur des algues / Et les fleurs nous font des cœurs plus beaux / Un soir fidele et bleu
beaux qui réfléchissent - leurs images dans les flots / et nous en sommes deux / et nous en sommes deux

Tempo

Il que nous échangerons un éclair - un qui - comme un long sanglet touché d'air / Et plus tard, un

rall. *rit.* *rit.*

flange et trouvant la protestation l'air fidèle et joyeux / et nous en sommes deux / et nous en sommes deux

Pour mémoire conforme : CH. DE BRY 1898

Pour mémoire conforme : CH. DE SIYRT 1898

La Mort des amants set by his poet friend Villiers de l'Isle Adam (as transcribed by Charles de Sivry, friend of Chabrier, brother-in-law of Verlaine, and son of Debussy's first piano teacher).

Villiers, a skilful pianist, took composition lessons from Chabrier; Fauré set two of his poems ("Nocturne" and "Les Présents"); Debussy toyed with the idea of an opera on his play *Axé!*

Baudelaire, *La Mort des amants*: first published in *Le Messager de l'Assemblée* 1851, then *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857)
Set to music by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1865-1869?), Gaston Serpette (1879), Maurice Rollinat (c.1880-1883),
Claude Debussy (1887) & Gustave Charpentier (1895)

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Internet resources are ever-changing, but presently (2014) include the Centre International de la mélodie française, under the direction of François Le Roux (www.melodiefrancaise.com).

Strophes omitted from songs are shown in grey.

L'Invitation au voyage

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble !
Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble!
Les soleils mouillés
De ces ciels brouillés
Pour mon esprit ont les charmes
Si mystérieux
De tes traîtres yeux,
Brillant à travers leurs larmes.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

Des meubles luisants,
Polis par les ans,
Décoreraient notre chambre;
Les plus rares fleurs
Mêlant leurs odeurs
Aux vagues senteurs de l'ambre,
Les riches plafonds,
Les miroirs profonds,
La splendeur orientale,
Tout y parlerait
À l'âme en secret
Sa douce langue natale.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

Vois sur ces canaux
Dormir ces vaisseaux
Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
C'est pour assouvir
Ton moindre désir
Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde.
— Les soleils couchants
Revêtent les champs,
Les canaux, la ville entière,
D'hyacinthe et d'or;
Le monde s'endort
Dans une chaude lumière.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

Invitation to the Voyage

My child, my sister,
Think of the sweetness
Of going to live together there!
Of loving at will,
Of loving and dying,
In the land that is like you!
The misty suns
Of those cloudy skies
Bear for me the charms
So mysterious,
Of your treacherous eyes,
Shining brightly through their tears.

There all is order and beauty,
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

Gleaming furniture,
Polished by the years,
Would ornament our bedroom;
The rarest flowers
Mingling their fragrance
With the faint scent of amber,
The ornate ceilings,
The deep mirrors,
The oriental splendour,
All would whisper there
Secretly to the soul
In its soft, native language.

There all is order and beauty,
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

See on the canals
Those vessels sleeping
Their mood is adventurous;
It's so as to satisfy
Your every desire
That they come from the ends of the earth.
— The setting suns
Adorn the fields,
The canals, the whole city,
With hyacinth and gold;
The world falls asleep
In a warm glow of light.

There all is order and beauty,
Luxury, peace, and pleasure.

Charles Baudelaire c.1848, first published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* 1855, then *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).
Set to music by Jules Cressonnois (c.1863), Emmanuel Chabrier (1870, with bassoon obbligato), Henri Duparc (1870), Benjamin Godard (1870s), P. & L. Hillemacher (1880s), G. Pascal d'Aix (1880s), Maurice Rollinat (c.1885), Gustave Charpentier (1895)

Hymne

À la très-chère, à la très-belle,
Qui remplit mon cœur de clarté,
À l'ange, à l'idole immortelle,
Salut en immortalité!

Elle se répand dans ma vie,
Comme un air imprégné de sel,
Et dans mon âme inassouvie,
Verse le goût de l'Eternel.

Sachet toujours frais qui parfume
L'atmosphère d'un cher réduit,
Encensoir oublié qui fume
En secret à travers la nuit.

Comment, amour incorruptible,
T'exprimer avec vérité?
Grain de musc, qui gît invisible,
Au fond de mon éternité?

À la très-bonne, à la très-belle,
Qui fait ma joie et ma santé,
À l'ange, à l'idole immortelle,
Salut en immortalité!

Charles Baudelaire 8 May 1854 (letter to Mme Sabatier), first published in *Le Présent* 1857, then *La Petite Revue* 1865, then *Les Épaves* 1866, then *Le Parnasse contemporain* 1866, then 3rd edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* 1868.
Set to music by Gabriel Fauré (1870)

La Rançon

L'homme a, pour payer sa rançon
Deux champs au tuf profond et riche,
Qu'il faut qu'il remue et défriche
Avec le fer de la raison;

Pour obtenir la moindre rose,
Pour extorquer quelques épis,
Des pleurs salés de son front gris,
Sans cesse il faut qu'il les arrose!

L'un est l'Art et l'autre, l'Amour.
— Pour rendre le juge propice,
Lorsque de la stricte justice
Paraîtra le terrible jour,

Il faudra lui montrer des granges
Pleines de moissons, et de fleurs,
Dont les formes et les couleurs
Gagnent le suffrage des Anges.

Charles Baudelaire c.1852, first published in *Le Présent* 1857, then *La Petite Revue* 1865, then *Les Épaves* 1866, then *Le Parnasse contemporain* 1866, then 3rd edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* 1868.
Set to music by Gabriel Fauré (c. 1871)

Hymn

To the very dear one, the very lovely one,
Who fills my heart with brightness,
To the angel, the immortal idol,
Forever hail!

She pervades my life
Like a salt-filled breeze,
And into my unsatisfied soul
Pours the taste of the Eternal.

Sachet ever-fresh that perfumes
The air of a beloved recess,
Forgotten censer that smokes
In secret through the night.

Incorruptible love,
How to express the truth of you?
Grain of musk, that lies unseen
At the bottom of my eternity?

To the very good one, the very lovely one,
Who is my delight and my health,
To the angel, the immortal idol,
Forever hail!

The Ransom

Man has, for paying his ransom,
Two fields of rich, deep rock
That he must clear and cultivate
With the iron of his reason;

To obtain the sorriest rose,
To extort a few ears of grain,
With salty sweat from his dreary brow
He must water them constantly!

One is Art and the other Love.
— To win the judge's favor
When the terrible day
Of dispassionate justice dawns,

He will have to show granaries
Filled with harvests and with flowers
Whose forms and colors will
Win the suffrage of the Angels.

Chant d'automne

I

Bientôt nous plongerons dans les froides ténèbres,
Adieu, vive clarté de nos étés trop courts !
J'entends déjà tomber, avec des chocs funèbres,
Le bois retentissant sur le pavé des cours.

Tout l'hiver va rentrer dans mon être: colère,
Haine, frissons, horreur, labeur dur et forcé,
Et, comme le soleil dans son enfer polaire,
Mon cœur ne sera plus qu'un bloc rouge et glacé.

J'écoute en frémissant chaque bûche qui tombe;
L'échafaud qu'on bâtit n'a pas d'écho plus sourd.
Mon esprit est pareil à la tour qui succombe
Sous les coups du bélier infatigable et lourd.

Il me semble, bercé par ce choc monotone,
Qu'on cloue en grande hâte un cercueil quelque part!
Pour qui? — C'était hier l'été; voici l'automne !
Ce bruit mystérieux sonne comme un départ !

II

J'aime, de vos longs yeux, la lumière verdâtre.
Douce beauté, mais tout aujourd'hui m'est amer!
Et rien, ni votre amour, ni le boudoir, ni l'âtre,
Ne me vaut le soleil rayonnant sur la mer !

Et pourtant aimez-moi, tendre cœur! soyez mère,
Même pour un ingrat, même pour un méchant;
Amante ou sœur, soyez la douceur éphémère
D'un glorieux automne ou d'un soleil couchant.

Courte tâche! La tombe attend; elle est avide!
Ah! laissez-moi, mon front posé sur vos genoux,
Goûter, en regrettant l'été blanc et torride,
De l'arrière saison le rayon jaune et doux !

Song of Autumn

I

Soon we shall plunge into the cold darkness;
Farewell, vivid brightness of our short-lived summers!
Already I hear fall to the ground, with funereal thuds,
The wood which rings out on the courtyard cobblestones.

All winter will get into my being: anger,
Hatred, shivering, horror, hard and forced labour,
And, like the sun in his polar hell,
My heart will be no more than a frozen red block.

I listen, trembling, to each log as it falls;
The building of a scaffold has no duller sound.
My spirit resembles the tower which crumbles
Under the tireless blows of the battering ram.

It seems to me, lulled by this monotonous thud,
That somewhere they're nailing a coffin, in great haste!
For whom? — Yesterday was summer; here is autumn!
That mysterious noise sounds like a departure!

II

I love the greenish light of your long eyes,
Sweet beauty, but today everything is bitter for me;
And nothing, neither your love, your boudoir, nor your hearth
Is worth as much as the sunlight on the sea!

Yet, love me, tender heart! be a mother,
Even to a thankless wretch, even to a villain;
Mistress or sister, be the fleeting sweetness
Of a glorious autumn or of a setting sun.

Short task! The tomb awaits; it is greedy!
Ah! let me, with my head resting on your knees,
Savour, as I mourn for the white, torrid summer,
The sweet, yellow rays of late autumn!

Charles Baudelaire, first published in *La Revue contemporaine* 1859, then 2nd & 3rd editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861, 1868).
Set to music by Gabriel Fauré (c. 1871), then by Maurice Rollinat (c.1880-1885).
(Rollinat, known as the "Singing poet of the Chat Noir", wrote the poem *Tes yeux bleus*, set to music by his friend Chabrier in 1885.)