

# French 1

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## Question 1

### Chapter 1 - *Why This Guide?*

- (a) While I am in general less familiar with French musical traditions than I am with American and German traditions, I am familiar with the music of Debussy, Fauré, and Poulenc. I am immediately struck, however, with the focus on this era of French music, which I would consider modern. Some of my Favourite music is the music of Josquin des Prez. Is this music antiquated in the same way to more popular and modern French Song traditions in the same way that some of the music of Bach is to Schubert?
- (b) In a more informal tone: *Wow*, I do *NOT* know any French poets. I don't recognise any of the ones mentioned in this Chapter.
- (c) What strikes me most is the implication that there is more to French rhyme patterns than simply sound. I am aware that French is a language where much of it is simply not pronounced (or, more accurately, the pronunciation is predicated by a phonetics that overloads different sounds in many different ways that I am not familiar with) but had never considered the rhythmic implications of that non-pronunciation.
- (d) I'm very excited to learn new things in our study of French song. Franck and Vierne are among my Favourite composers: are either of them particularly well known for their Songs? Also, when talking about German Songs, we've been calling many of them *Lieder*. Is there a special term for French Songs as well? I've heard the terms *chant* and *chanson*, but I'm not sure of their prevalence as compared to *Lieder*.

### Chapter 2 - *The Basics of French Line*

- (a) I am, though likely less well read than the rest of the class, at least generally familiar with the English language and some of its poetic and rhythmic quirks, so the comparisons between the Alexandrine and the sonnet were very helpful.
- (b) I am very unfamiliar with French song, literature, language, and pronunciation, so this guide should be very useful to me. For starters, I had no idea about the Alexandrine as a poetic form; I've heard of it, yes, but until now I hadn't taken the time to even learn the basic structure.
- (c) I think an early internalisation that, while English shares quite a bit of vocabulary from French - every time I see a new French loanword I'm

surprised I already know it - much of the English sentence and syllable structure is significantly closer to German/Germanic Language (though this may just be an effect of my familiarity with German pronunciation) is likely the most important concept to consider in the early process of learning about French poetry and song.

- (d) I don't think I know enough about this topic yet to have any insightful Questions or at least any confusion that couldn't be solved by reading an encyclopedia.

### **Appendix 1 - *Le Colibri***

- (a) Nothing. I've never seen this poem, never heard of this Author, and never realised just how little French I know how to pronounce or read.
- (b) The inverses of everything mentioned above (the poem, author, and pronunciations) are all new to me, as well as the very detailed analysis of French rhyme and meter, much of which took me multiple readings to really comprehend.
- (c) For me, the obsessive analysis of the French phonetics involved in constructing this rhyme scheme is the most important part. I'm not sure I feel comfortable doing this sort of line-by-line analysis of the language just yet, but It's very helpful to see it broken down so neatly.
- (d) Is there a particular collection/anthology of French poetry that I could read that would prepare me better for this class? Or, just generally, is there a mixed collection of French poetry (+ translations, because I, unfortunately, do not speak French) that you would recommend?

### **Appendix 3 - *Chronology of French Verse***

- (a) I do recognise some of these Authors! The few I recognise are: Charles d'Orléans, La Fontaine, Lamartine, (Victor, I assume) Hugo, Gautier, (Is it Robert?) Bonnières. Unfortunately, I don't believe I have read any of these Authors, which, to me, means I am less familiar with them than if I concretely knew I hadn't read any work of theirs.
- (b) I'm not sure I know enough for any of this timeline to be especially useful, unfortunately.
- (c) It is helpful that this timeline becomes progressively more granular after 1800. The granularity clarifies, for me, the intended era of study of this particular guide.
- (d) Too many to count, but, again, nothing insightful or more involved than can be answered with an encyclopedia.

## Question 2

*Crystal's Comment (for fun, unrelated to the assignment):* Oh my *GOSH* I guess I shouldn't be surprised but these are so delightfully *French* - I know, shocker. The piano textures are so intricate, the harmonies so contrapuntal and clearly organic in a way I much more closely associate with French music. I'm a big fan of the way the piano part goes into three staves in the Koechlin setting.

1. I never thought of French as a particularly vowel-heavy language. The most French sounds I can think of are the - pardon my very inaccurate vernacular here - guttural "H" and "R" sounds and the many varieties of "S" and "Z" sounds. Here, though, unlike the German song we have been studying, I can recognise very few consonants (and thus, to my untrained ear, syllables) to ground myself and hear the text. Thus, all of my thoughts come more from a close reading of the score, and less from any aural response. I personally think that the Chausson setting is more interesting in terms of text-painting: the trill-like figurations in the piano part and the later runs and arpeggios call to other contemporaneous depictions of small flight as depicted on piano (though, the two pieces I am primarily thinking of are both titled "Papillons", or "Butterflies", which, while I think is close enough, is not quite the same), and, most interestingly, the piano part takes on the role of the hymn or chorale in the end when the poor hummingbird dies, as if turning the last stanza into a prayer or funeral for the hummingbird (note the pianistic similarities to Alkan's "Priere" and the Funeral Dirge from his Grand Piano Sonata, as well as the use of chorale themes in Liszt's Ballades and Prayers). Finally, a landing on the sweetest Perfect Authentic Cadence describing the fond memory of a first kiss. No words: just pianistically and narratively beautiful.
2. I think I accidentally answered both questions in the first answer, so I will restate that I think the Chausson setting is more interesting - more successful - and that the piano texture is much more narrative than one would expect from a barely-melodic accompaniment part.

### Question 3

1. It is almost commical just how “Spanish” most of these songs sound, almost entirely - from my instrumental perspective - from the treatment of the piano part as guitar stand-in. Saint-Saëns’ “Guitar” emulation is likely the most conventionally divorced from Spain as a guitar-sound: he starts the piece with wide arpeggios centered in and around the chords of E, B, A, D, and B-Flat. These chords, seemingly only loosely related, are in fact *very* comfortable, idiomatic, and easy to play on a standard open E guitar tuning. Similarly, Lalo and Bizet use explicit flamenco rhythms and again are centered in the keys of E-Flat and A (open E-flat being a common tuning and A just being a standard key for the dance “Bulerias”), further referencing explicitly a Spanish Guitar tradition. Unfortunately, Massenet’s setting fails in this regard (that is, in my opinion). The bouncing “oom-pah” rhythm is much more common on the piano, and the duple meter is less common in the Spanish Guitar tradition, though the rolled chords at the end are charming and “strummed” like a guitar.
2. With careful score study I am able to recognise some of the text and hear the rhythmic structures, but they are, for me, unfortunately hidden by some gorgeously addictive melodies and delightful piano textures. I think I will need a lot more practice with French poetry before I can produce any reasonably insightful discourse on the actual text of the song.
3. I cannot pick between the Lalo and Bizet settings, but I will contend that they are so enjoyable to me for different reasons. I think that, even though the Bizet’s texture is a little less “guitar-like”, the explicit harmonic references to *Bulerias* and the melismatic (almost improvisational) flourishes are so delightfully “flamenco” that it is the more academically successful piece; I simply think that the brighter Lalo setting is more beautiful, and it reminds me of the second dance from Liszt’s *Rhapsodie Espagnole*.

## Question 4

I wasn't sure how to structure this response, especially because it is framed as a "present to the class" response, so I put some notes here for what I was looking at/thinking of.

- Bio
  - Name: Jules Émile Frédéric Massenet
  - Years: 12 May 1842 - 13 August 1912
  - Location: France
- famous opera composer (more than 30 operas)
- Education
  - Lycée Saint-Louis (non-academic studies)
  - Paris Conservatoire (from early 1850s, musical studies)
- Musical Lineage
  - Met Wagner
  - Admired Berlioz
  - Met Franz Liszt in Rome
  - Teacher Lineage:
    - \* taught Charles Koechlin
    - \* Massenet
    - \* Ambroise Thomas (Taught at Paris Conservatoire)  
anti- Franck, Fauré
    - \* Friedrich Kalkbrenner (teacher of Marie Pleyel)  
indirectly influenced/taught Gottschalk, Saint-Saëns
- Famous Works
  - Operas
    - \* Manon
    - \* Werther: based on Goethe!
    - \* Thaïs (with the famous meditation)
    - \* Don Quixote, Cinderella

- Musical Impressions
  - Heavily Lyrical
  - French Elegance (in lineage with Couperin, Gounod)
  - In the kindest way possible, a little boring
  - A reluctance toward interesting piano parts

I found some lovely piano music of his as well, but couldn't find anything that was commonly played. Much of the songs I've heard and piano work I've found seems to be more straightforward salon music than I had expected, especially because I was, prior to this assignment familiar with *Thaïs* and *Werther*.