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Débarrassons Nous de Nos Mamelles & *Half of What She Thinks*:

Two Recitals in Classical Voice

A Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Arts

of Bard College

by

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Program Notes: Concert I, *Débarrassons Nous de Nos Mamelles*

The women in these pieces—whether as text's author or object, operatic character, or inspiration—carry centuries of literary subconsciousness. Sheherazade, Salome, Bilitis, Hebe, Chloris, and Tiresias (in a feminine-form in my piece of reference) are touchstones of ancient culture; some are real people aggrandized to protagonize epics, some are goddesses whose actions or mere existences affect the course of human psychology. *Débarrassons Nous de Nos Mamelles*, for those of you who haven't Google-translated it, means "Let's get rid of our breasts." In one of these pieces I mean it literally: by getting rid of her "feminine charms," the character can see them at an objective remove, such that she contemplates her own sensuality from the outside. In the same way, each of these characters is the object of her narrative depth, for though she is held up as a historical symbol, she can only describe only immediate sensory present. French music frames this phenomenon, of the speaker's temporal removal from his or her context. To summarize soprano Elly Ameling's explanation, when singing a German lied you are a part of the painting, while when singing a French *mélodie* you stand beside the painting and say, "Look."

Ravel's *Shéhérazade* is a textbook example, a painting filled with exotic novelties. The set is named after the heroine storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights*, who ends the king Shahryar's marrying and killing a virgin each night by spinning enormous tales. But the set never uses her voice exactly, rather the voices of women inspired by and within her world.

"À Chloris" is a simple love song in the Baroque style. It harkens back to two senses of origin—the period of the first "art songs" as we now call them, and the Ancient

Greeks, by naming the loved one after the pale green nymph who transformed Adonis, Attis, Crocus, Hyacinthus, and Narcissus into flowers.

The story of the adolescent Salomé, the cursed "daughter of Babylon" who falls in lust for John the Baptist, has taken on multiple tones. In Strauss's opera, she performs the infamously provocative "Dance of the Seven Veils" for her stepfather and receives John's decapitated head on a platter. In Massenet's much tamer rendition, she returns to Jerusalem after being abandoned by her mother, singing of John's spiritual seductiveness, rather than a physical compulsion to him as in Strauss's. In both cases she is a creature who can only express herself sensually, and John's enigmatic presentations set her ablaze.

In *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, Debussy's heroine channels her surfacing sexuality into restrained, sparkling poetry. Pierre de Louÿs, whose texts Debussy set in this cycle, claimed to have found the erotic verses inscribed on the walls of a tomb in Cyprus, composed by a sixth-century Greek courtesan named Bilitis. de Louÿs concocted an investigation of the claim under the fictitious name Herr G. Heim (in English, "Mr. S. Ecret"), archaeologist. After years of, most likely suspended, scholarly belief, it was eventually revealed that the poems were of de Louÿs's making, reworded epigrams from the *Palatine Anthology* and phrases modeled after the legendary poetess Sappho. It is conjectured, by Herr G. Heim in his "research," that Bilitis studied verse with Sappho when living in the Lesbos city of Mytilene, and that she was in love with her.

Bilitis's diary has over 100 entries. The three set to music come from the first section, "Bucolics in Pamphylia," which document growing up in a mountain village on what is today the southern coast of Turkey, near Cyprus. According to her biography,

> The country is stony and sad, shadowed by profound forests... great salty lakes abide on the heights, and the valleys are filled with silence... She regarded the nymphs with ardent piety... The close of her pastoral existence was saddened by a love of which we know little... Having become the mother of a child which she abandoned, Bilitis quitted Pamphylia for unknown reasons and never returned to the place of her birth.

In investigating the poetry directly, it's clear that this lover was Lykas, a shepherd a number of years older than her. In the words of William Gibbons in his analysis of the set, “The three poems Debussy selected for his brief song cycle express the major aspects of Louÿs’s narrative by invoking what Barthes (1977) refers to as the “cardinal points” of the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas: the attraction, the consummation, and the termination of the relationship."

Chausson wrote his *7 Mélodies*, of which "Hébé" is a part, on a pilgrimage to see Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. I like to think of him in an inn *en route*, scribbling music to text about the cup-bearing goddess of youth while occasionally daydreaming into how Wagner may have adopted the epic poem of Percival's quest for the Holy Grail. Massenet and Debussy made trips to Beyreuth at different points years later; the poet for *Shéhérazade* went by the pen-name Tristan Klingsor, a compound of Wagnerian character names. It's impossible not to consider Wagner's influence over the grand stories these composers chose to represent.

Then there's *Les mamelles de Tirésias,* perhaps the perfect opposition to the Wagnerian epic. Poulenc's opera is an *opera bouffe* with Apollinaire text—a surreal, *Lysistrata*-like circus about whether or not to make babies. Whether epic or nonsensical, angelicism and hedonism twist around and infiltrate each other in these pieces, a combination at which the French seem to excel.

Program Notes: Concert II, *Half of What She Thinks*

The title comes from the first piece I worked on this semester, Marzelline's aria from Beethoven's *Fidelio.* A translated excerpt reads, "Oh if only I'd already united with you, and 'husband' I could call you! A girl can, indeed, only confess to half of what she thinks." That phrase stuck in my head, inspiring me to frame this program in terms of emotional disclosure. The program is highly romantic—sentimentally divulgent and forthright—until a twentieth-century child has her say and issues in a wake of partially-hidden poems and characters.

In the selected pieces from the cycle *Haugtussa*, Schubert's "Heimliches Lieben," and the touchstone aria from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut,* each character's unmitigated expression is confined by their circumstances. The Norwegian shepherdess given the eponym *Haugtussa* (a seductive forest creature from Scandinavian folklore) for her psychic powers, sings her stories, concerns about lost love, and feisty fantasies with an open heart, but to indifferent brooks and cows. "Heimliches Lieben"—a higher-temperature version of Marzelline's sentiment—illustrates an affair which can never be public. It is uncharacteristic of Schubert in a number of ways: it's very much a period piece, arguably the most sensual text Schubert ever set, one of the only texts written by a woman that he set, though not intentionally, as it was thought to have been written by a man living in the same town. Manon laments choosing her love of material things over romantic love. She sings in a "golden alcove" of lace and sunlight in the home of old but wealthy Geronte, for whom she left the impoverished student Des Grieux. She uses the physical beauty around her as imagery for describing the emotional beauty of her former life.

"Sephestia's Lullaby" and "A la mar" switch between raw expression and composed phrases which are meant for others to hear. The former, a member of the eerie song set *A Charm of Lullabies*, is a glimpse into Sephestia's domestic existence before her son is captured by pirates. In Robert Greene's convoluted romance *Menaphon*, Sephestia lives among shepherds, her disguise and others' accidentally allowing for her to be courted by the father who banished her, the husband who abandoned her, and her lost son. "A la mar" is devoid of context, a character struggling to spell out her mourning process by singing "to the sea."

In two pieces on this program, nature imagery is paired with music which challenges its simplicity. "Silhouette," a collection of images from Galilee, a region of northern Israel, maintains a tourist's distance. The text never once explicates the singer's emotional self, only inviting an interpretation of such according to her choice and handling of the peculiar images. This piece is musically choppy, like someone recalling a scene from a dream, ruminating on it, losing it, catching hold of another, each mini expedition bursting into nonsensical Arabic. When "The Trees on the Mountain" is sung in *Susannah*—the Apocryphal tale of Susannah and the Elders set in New Hope Valley, Tennessee, and without a happy ending—the 18-year-old's church community has turned against the title character. The wives are jealous of the attention their husbands give her, the husbands preach her wickedness after seeing her in the wood, bathing naked. Susanna channels her loneliness through this folk song, generating an aria whose soaring vocal line exceeds the subdued rural imagery of the text, which, like her community, holds her within a conventional box.

The two remaining pieces carelessly and carefully break free. "I hate music" is sung by a precocious child, hardly caring if her pointed candor offends anyone. The quote came from Bernstein's New York roommate—artist Edys Merrill, to whom the full set is dedicated—who would walk around the apartment, covering her ears, shouting it while Bernstein coached opera singers. "Leap Before You Look," composed by Talma the year preceding her two successive Guggenheim Fellowships, exposes a harshness lying beneath the cool exterior of Auden's poetry. Auden wrote this poem his first year as an American citizen, which invites the possibility of it as an American manifesto of independence and agency, though exactly what he wants from us is as unclear as the future we're asked to leap into.