

AN EVENING OF ROMANTIC SONG

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Series Director Abendmusik Alexandria

This evening soprano D'nissa Hester and pianist Elena Bogaczová grace Abendmusik Alexandria as they present *An Evening of Romantic Song*. Their selections include an array of songs which explore the concept of love in many of its varied guises. The songs are by German and French composers of the nineteenth century, many of the most admired creators of art song. Together we shall encounter *lied* (plural, *lieder*) – a song in the German language – as well as its French parallel, the *mélodie*. Both genres reached new heights and new levels of popularity over the course of the nineteenth century – our Romantic Era.

It is fitting that we begin our program this evening with three songs by **Franz Schubert (1797-1828)**. In a sense, Schubert was the father of the *lied*, and he composed more than 700 *lieder* throughout the course of his career. As one scholar has remarked, “all of the great German and Austrian *lieder* written after Schubert – from Schumann through Richard Strauss – are fruits deeply rooted in Schubertian soil.” His example – the through-composed song which pairs each stanza of text with music specifically suited to its emotional mood or narrative – was adopted and extended by these later composers. Before Schubert, songs were typically strophic with the same melody repeated for each new line of text; even the songs of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven in retrospect seem lacking in this way. Through Schubert though, the song became as vivid as a scene in an opera and as structurally interesting as a symphony, concerto, or another work in the instrumental genres. His ingenious melodies must also have been an inspiration for later composers as Schubert's successors continually tried to recapture Schubert's unparalleled gift for melody in their own songs.

The first of the songs by Schubert heard on this evening's program is *Lachen und Weinen (Laughing and Crying, 1823)*. This light-hearted song sets a text by Schubert's contemporary, the poet Friedrich Rückert. Here the poet comments on the mysterious ability of love to inspire the seeming opposites laughing and crying.

The next song *Lied der Mignon* alternatively speaks of the yearning love can bring about: at one point, Mignon calls out “Ah! He who loves and knows me is far away. I am dizzy, my inmost parts burn.” Mignon is the central character in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meister*, and Schubert returned to her songs to create different settings several times



Franz Schubert

throughout his life. The final song by Schubert to be heard this evening is *Ständchen (Serenade, 1826)* which takes “Hark, Hark, the Lark” from William Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* as its text. This serenade is actually an aubade – a morning song used to wake lovers who have illicitly spent the night together before they are caught at dawn. The translation from English to German is by August Wilhelm Schlegel with a second verse added by Friedrich Reil.

The next songs on our program are by two of the earliest advocates of Schubert's music – **Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)** and **Robert Schumann (1810-1856)**. Mendelssohn and Schumann were, in fact, the ones who instigated the Schubert revival after Schumann discovered the manuscript of the *Great C Major Symphony* and Mendelssohn gave its premiere at the Leipzig *Gewandhaus* a decade after Schubert's death.

Mendelssohn's *Neue Liebe (New Love, 1832)* sets a text by Heinrich Heine, an author whose poetry was often set to music by the Romantic composers. Like something out of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the speaker of this poem receives a vision of elves riding past on white horses and wonders if his vision is the result of his newfound love or a foreshadowing of his death.



Robert Schumann

Robert Schumann's *lieder* had much to do with the courtship of his future wife **Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896)**. In 1840 – the year of their marriage – he wrote an amazing 140 of his 250 songs. As would be expected, many of these are on the subject of love, including *Du Ring an meinem Finger (Ring on My Finger, 1840)* and *Widmung (Dedication, 1840)*. *Ring on My Finger* is about discovering love for the very first time and the new meaning that love brings to life at the end of childhood. The song is one of eight in Schumann's cycle *Frauenliebe und -leben (A Woman's Love and Life)* based on poetry by Adalbert von Chamisso. *Dedication* is the first in another song cycle by Schumann, *Myrthen (Myrtles)*. The poem by Rückert was written during the poet's own courtship, giving it special significance for Schumann and his future bride. Its opening lines are as sweet and sincere as any wedding vows: “You are my soul, you are my heart, you are my joy and my pain, you are the world I live in, the heaven in which I float.” Schumann also gives Schubert a nod when he briefly quotes his predecessor's most famous song *Ave Maria* in the final bars of *Dedication*.

Clara Schumann, a composer herself, gave her reply to Robert's love songs through love songs of her own. *Liebst du um Schönheit (If You Love Beauty)* is one of these songs, written in 1841 after she and her husband were already married. The text – again by Rückert – asks for a lifelong commitment from the beloved, resolving “Love me forever, and I will love you as long.” Likewise, the poem also asks the beloved to only love for love's sake – not for beauty, youth, or wealth which can all be found elsewhere. *If You Love Beauty* was one of twelve songs composed and published jointly by Robert and Clara as *Twelve Songs from F. Rückert's "Springtime of Love."*



Clara Wieck Schumann

The song *Fleur desséchée (Dried Flower)* by the French mezzo-soprano and composer **Pauline Viardot (1821-1910)** gives us another female perspective on love. Pauline Viardot was the daughter of the famous Spanish tenor Manuel García and quickly gained fame as a singer herself while still an adolescent. Becoming one of the lead singers at the *Théâtre-Italien* in Paris, she married the theatre's director Louis Viardot who became her personal impresario and accompanist as they travelled incessantly across Europe to give recitals. She was a personal friend of Chopin and George Sand, and her impressive three-octave vocal range inspired composers as notable as Berlioz, Saint-Saëns, Meyerbeer, and Brahms to write major works for her. After a trip to St. Petersburg, she also became an early advocate of Russian music and culture. The text to her song *Dried Flower* is by Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. It speaks of a flower pressed in a forgotten book and the memories that might once have been associated with the flower – memories of two lovers separated with the pressed flower the only remaining trace of their affection for one another.

The writing of songs played a central role in the career of **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)**. Fauré spoke coldly of his songs, however, when he remarked, “They have been much sung. Not enough to have made my fortune, but far too much just the same, because colleagues reckoned that having succeeded so well in this genre I should have stuck to it for life!” Although Fauré did explore many genres throughout his career, he always returned to song nonetheless: he wrote his first song when he was just sixteen and his last songs in 1922 only two years before his death at the age of seventy-nine. *Après un rêve (After a Dream, c.1878)* dates from relatively early in his career and has remained one of his most popular songs. The text, a translation from Italian by Romain Bussine, begs for the return of a lost dream, a dream in which a lost lover returns: “In a sleep charmed by your image I dreamed of happiness.” The music sensitively captures these feelings of nostalgia and despair, delicately illustrating the emotional state of the poem.

Although songs occupy a lesser role in the output of **Claude Debussy (1862-1918)** than they had for Fauré, Debussy's songs

lack nothing in quality. Debussy like Fauré also wrote songs throughout his compositional career and, in fact, his earliest songs – songs written before he had developed his mature idiom – sound much like those of Fauré. *Beau soir (Fair Evening, c.1880)* is one of these early songs. The text by Paul Bourget paints a pastoral scene in its opening lines, and then the scene itself advises the reader to “enjoy the gift of life, whilst one is young and the evening is fair.”

Three songs by **Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947)** conclude this evening's program. Hahn, although born in Venezuela, moved to Paris with his family when he was only three years old; it was in France that he stayed and made his career as a composer, conductor, and salon singer.

Hahn's *L'heure exquise (The Hour of Dreaming)* is from a collection of seven songs published in 1893, all of which set texts by the eminent French poet Paul Verlaine. Here two lovers take time to dream while amid the nighttime forest, a shimmering pond, and the illuminated moon. In *Offrande (Offering, 1891)*, a lover offers her heart to her lover, declaring “may the humble present be sweet in your beautiful eyes.” The text is also by Verlaine. The final song *Si mes vers avaient des ailes (If My Verses Had Wings, 1888)* is perhaps the most famous of all Hahn's compositions. Set to a poem by Victor Hugo, *If My Verses* supposes that the poet's writings would literally take flight to be with the object of his love if only they had wings to do so.



Reynaldo Hahn

© Jackson Harmeyer 2016

Jackson Harmeyer is a composer, music scholar, and advocate of music. He is a graduate of the Louisiana Scholars' College – Louisiana's designated honors college located on the campus of Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. While there, Jackson completed an undergraduate thesis entitled “Learning from the Past: The Influence of Johann Sebastian Bach upon the Soviet Composers.” He has followed classical music around the world, attending the BachFest Leipzig in Germany, Colorado's Aspen Music Festival, and many concerts across Louisiana and Texas. Resident in Alexandria, Louisiana, Jackson works with the Arts Council of Central Louisiana as Series Director of the Abendmusik Alexandria chamber music series. He also writes the program notes for the Rapides Symphony Orchestra, blogs at MusicCentral, and continues to study other aspects of music in his spare time. His four-movement Suite for Solo Guitar, Op. 21 received its world premiere on November 5, 2015 at Abendmusik Alexandria.



Read additional program notes by Jackson at www.JacksonHarmeyer.com.