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PHILIPS

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BERLIOZ

Les nuits d'été

RAVEL

Shéhérazade

DEBUSSY

La damoiselle élue

DUPARC

Chanson triste
L'invitation au voyage

Elly Ameling
Hildegard Behrens

HECTOR BERLIOZ (1803-1869)

Les nuits d'été

1	I Villanelle	2'42
2	II Le spectre de la rose	6'47
3	III Sur les lagunes	6'55
4	IV Absence	5'59
5	V Au cimetière	5'38
6	VI L'île inconnue	3'44

Hildegard Behrens, soprano
Wiener Symphoniker
Francis Travis

MAURICE RAVEL (1875-1937)

Shéhérazade

7	I Asie	10'06
8	II La flûte enchantée	2'53
9	III L'indifférent	3'47

HENRI DUPARC (1848-1933)

10	Chanson triste	3'30
11	L'invitation au voyage	4'39

CLAUDE DEBUSSY (1862-1918)

12	La damoiselle élue	20'11
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Elly Ameling, soprano
Janice Taylor, mezzo-soprano **12**
Women of the San Francisco Symphony Chorus **12**
San Francisco Symphony Orchestra
Edo de Waart

Total timing: 77'36

Hector Berlioz never shied away from the wonderful and the strange – he was the very embodiment of the darker side of Romanticism. In poetry, his equivalents included Edgar Allan Poe, and, in his own country, Theophile Gautier. Berlioz was attracted to Gautier's collection of poems titled *La Comédie de la mort*, and he set six of them to music as *Les Nuits d'été* (Summer Nights), completing the cycle when he was in his mid thirties, but not orchestrating it until a decade later.

In 'Villanelle' it is Spring, and the singer invites a lover into the woods so they may enjoy the flora and the fauna of the season together. 'Le spectre de la rose' is the spirit of a rose which a young girl wore on her breast at a ball the evening before. Although the spirit will haunt her nightly, it tells her not to fear, because his death, on her pillowy bosom, was a sweet one. A more tragic death haunts 'Sur les lagunes' (On the lagoons), which is subtitled 'Lament'. The singer's beloved lies in the grave, and the phrase, 'Ah, without love, to be journeying upon the sea!' punctuates each of the three stanzas.

A living but absent lover is the subject of 'Absence'. Again, three times the singer implores, 'Come back, come back, my beloved'. Poe himself would have been proud to write 'Au cimetière' (In the graveyard). Subtitled 'Moonlight', it is the song of a dove, sitting on the branch of a yew tree over the grave of a dead woman, and exerts its morbid fascination over the singer. Having descended to the depths of gloom, Berlioz lightens the mood in the final song, 'L'île inconnue' (The unknown isle), which, like the first song, is a lover's invitation – this time, to enjoy the pleasures of the sea: 'Tell me, my fair one, where would you like to go?'

Maurice Ravel allows the listener his share of armchair travels in *Shéhérazade* – like *Les Nuits d'été*, a relatively youthful work. Although not as morbid as Berlioz, Ravel certainly shared his taste for the fantastic. The poems set by Ravel in *Shéhérazade* are from a collection by Tristan Klingsor, the Wagnerian *nom de plume* of the composer's friend A. J. Léon Leclère. Ravel never visited Asia, although he might have done so in 1905 – two years after completing *Shéhérazade* – had the Minister of Arts' suggestion of a possible diplomatic position come to fruition. (The

closest Ravel physically got to Arabic culture was Morocco.)

The composer selected from Klingsor's one hundred poems, and intentionally chose three that seemed to him to be the most difficult to set. 'Asie' (Asia), the longest of the three, is an increasingly ecstatic catalogue of the imagined wonders that the singer – apparently nourished on picture books and fairy tales – wishes to see. Klingsor's poetry anticipates a National Geographic travelogue in the wealth of its detail, and Ravel follows suit with the luxuriousness of his orchestration and the richness of his vocal writing. An element of the sinister creeps into the singer's imagination, and reaches a virtually orgasmic flowering at the words, 'Je voudrais voir mourir d'amour ou bien de la haine' (I would see people dying for love, or else for hate).

'La flûte enchantée' (The enchanted flute) opens with an exotic solo for that same instrument. The singer, now apparently the servant of an elderly master who is dozing, hears the sound of her beloved playing the flute outside. Each note, she sings, flies to her cheek like a mysterious kiss.

In the final song, 'L'indifférent' (The indifferent one – the gender is male), a young stranger of epicene beauty passes by the singer's door. Instead of accepting the singer's invitation to step inside for some refreshing wine, the stranger smilingly and gracefully declines, his 'hips gently swaying with his lazy, feminine gait'. In his biography of the composer (Phaidon, 1996), Gerald Larner writes, 'Ravel left few clues as to the nature of his sexuality but "L'indifférent" is one of the more significant.' ('I hope you'll have it sung by a girl,' said conductor Camille Chevillard to Ravel, upon seeing the score.)

Ravel's admitted model in *Shéhérazade* was Claude Debussy. One thing that Berlioz, Debussy and Ravel all had in common was that they, as young composers, had vied for the Prix de Rome, a competition organised by the Institut de France which sent its winners to Rome for two years of subsidised work at the Villa Medici. (Berlioz and Debussy won it, after some struggles – Ravel did not. The list of forgotten or forgettable composers who won the Prix is much longer than the list of winners whose names remain familiar today.) Periodically, awardees sent their newest compositions back to Paris for review by the

judges, who had little patience for modernism and independent thinking. One of the expectations was that composers would write cantatas based upon classical themes: Cleopatra, Sardanapalus, Myrrha and the like.

Debussy, having won the Prix, spent the rest of his life deriding it, and he managed to complete only two of the four required works during his stay in Rome. His *poème lyrique* based on Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Blessed Damozel* was submitted in 1890 after his return to France, and was unenthusiastically received by the judges. Rossetti's rather precious poem (which Debussy freely cut in his setting) concerns a woman who has died and been admitted to Paradise. Seeing other lovers happily reunited in the afterlife, she grieves that her lover remains behind, among the living, and imagines their happiness on the day when he will come to her. (The lover's thoughts, upon the woman's wishing his death to be hastened, are not shared with us!)

Debussy's assigns the woman's words to a soprano; a contralto and a women's chorus serve as narrators. The lightly perfumed music is a perfect complement to Rossetti's pre-Raphaelite conceit, in which nothing really

happens, per se, and in which emotion and atmosphere is everything.

Although Henri Duparc lived to the ripe old age of 85, his pathological self-criticism (and a nervous breakdown) severely limited his output – fifty years elapsed between his last completed work and his death. He did manage to complete little more than a dozen songs, some of which he orchestrated. With a text by the poet Jean Lahor (a pseudonym), *Chanson triste* (Sad song) reveals Duparc's early appreciation of Richard Wagner. The singer, weighed down by worldly cares, seeks forgetfulness and healing from love. *L'Invitation au voyage* is a setting of the poem by Charles Baudelaire, and describes a land where all is 'beauty, luxury, calm, and pleasure'.

Raymond Tuttle

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