

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POETRY AND MUSIC IN THE *MÉLODIES* OF REYNALDO HAHN

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SUMMARY. The present paper aims to reveal some of the features which characterize the *Méodies* of the French composer Reynaldo Hahn. Although his work comprises several genres, instrumental and vocal alike, these refined and sensitive vocal miniatures are most often associated with Hahn's name. Composer, conductor and music critic, himself a singer, the fascinating personality and intelligence of the composer is reflected in his works. His *Méodies* mirror Hahn's preoccupation regarding the relationship between poetry and music, between the spoken and the sung words. In the master's opinion, music should emphasize the deep, hidden meanings beyond the words, thus in his vocal miniatures he strives for a truthful evocation of that which remains unspeakable.

Keywords: Reynaldo Hahn, French, poetry, *Méodie*

Introduction

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870, along with the beginning of the Third French Republic marked a new phase in the history of France, a chapter characterized by prosperity and an optimistic point of view regarding life. The climate of this historical period was favourable for the unfolding of scientific and technological, as well as artistic innovations. Countless masterpieces were brought to life in the fields of visual arts, literature, music alike. Later, after the horrific experiences brought about by the First World War, this Golden Age when the arts flourished everywhere in Europe and especially in France came to be recalled as *La Belle Époque*, an age of serenity, beauty, peace. The *Belle Époque* coincides with the Victorian and Edwardian eras in the United Kingdom, but it can also be traced in the cultural evolution of other European countries as well.

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The name of the French composer Reynaldo Hahn is closely linked to this époque, his works, especially his songs reflecting the frail and pure beauty which surrounded and at the same time filled the artworks of the time. His compositions include stage works (operas and ballets), orchestral works as well as chamber music, while the manner in which Hahn approaches the act of composition distinguishes him among the French composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: *“An individualist with no ties to musical cliques or movements, he has paid the price for his aloofness by being unjustly neglected by the operatic establishment since his death (with the exception of a revival of «Le marchand de Venise» at the Opéra-Comique in 1979). Yet it can only be a matter of time before his work for the stage catches up with his reputation as a songwriter.”*²

The musical language Reynaldo Hahn employs in his works is unique, delicate yet powerful, the melodies of these works have a simple beauty which can easily be associated with Hahn’s style.

Reynaldo Hahn – A Biographical Sketch

Composer, conductor, singer and music critic Reynaldo Hahn was born in Caracas, Venezuela in 1874, as the youngest among the twelve children of a businessman and engineer of German-Jewish origin. His mother was a descendant of a wealthy Spanish family, successors of the Spanish colonists as most of these prosperous families were. When Reynaldo was only three years old the very tense political atmosphere in Venezuela determined the family to move to Paris, where Hahn became a naturalized French citizen. The artistic climate of this city had a great impact on the evolution of the future composer, although the child had already manifested early signs of musical talent during the years spent in Caracas.

At the Conservatoire he was carefully instructed by teachers among whom Camille Saint-Saëns or Jules Massenet (composition) can be mentioned. Massenet encouraged the young composer’s first works. Hahn’s collections of *Mélodies* brought him an early success, and these delicate songs often came to be associated with the composer’s name, despite the fact that he was also *“one of the greatest French operetta composers (...) and in fact wrote in a great variety of operatic genres.”*³

² Giroud, Vincent – *French Opera: A Short History*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London, 2010, p. 264-265.

³ Idem, p. 263.

The representation of exotic subjects on stage is one of the features which characterize 19th-century French opera. Thus, Hahn's first opera *L'île du rêve*, which was first staged in 1898 at the Opéra Comique, is inspired by Pierre Loti's *Rarahu*, which is set in Tahiti. The composer also adds the following subtitle to his work: "*idylle polynésienne*". Hahn's following operas include *La carmélite* (1902, Opéra Comique), *Nausicaa* (1919, Monte Carlo), and *Ciboulette* (1923, Théâtre des Variétés), the latter considered "*one of the finest operettas of the period, it also became Hahn's most successful works for stage.*"⁴

The works of Reynaldo Hahn have a particular style: the influence of his master Jules Massenet is discernible, but it harmoniously blends with the clarity of a certain neo-classical touch and with the serenity inspired to Hahn by the Impressionist poetry. The neo-classical influences in his works are also clearly displayed in two of his latter operas, the musical comedy *Mozart* (1925, Théâtre Édouard VII) and the opera *Le marchande de Venise* (1935, Palais Garnier).

At the end of the Second World War, after having spent the years of the Nazi Occupation of France in the southern part of the country, he was appointed director of the Paris Opera for a brief period, but his sudden illness prevented him from executing the reforms he had planned for this institution. His work also includes ballets, compositions for chamber orchestra, as well as numerous works for piano. Himself a distinguished singer, Hahn's vocal works prove the composer's knowledge of the singing voice and its possibilities.

Aspects Regarding Hahn's *Méodies*

One of the best-known *Méodies* of Reynaldo Hahn, *Si mes vers avaient des ailes*, on the verses of Victor Hugo, immediately gained the appreciation of Hahn's contemporaries. A closer analysis of this score will render even more impressive the fact that the young composer was only fourteen-years-old when he wrote this exquisite piece. Features which make Hahn's creation remarkable are distinguishable in this vocal miniature: the course of the vocal melody flows gently and naturally, closely following, almost "embracing" the words of Hugo's poem, while the accompaniment gives depth and color to each word. The fluid lines of the piano echo the ample sonorous arches specific for the musical discourse of Hahn's master, Jules Massenet (*E.g.* 1).

⁴ Idem, p. 264.

The Perfect Balance between Poetry and Music

Hahn's specific choice of organizing his musical discourse in accordance with the profound meaning of the poem he chooses to set to music will be analyzed in the following. The composer wrote *Mémoires* on the verses of poets like Paul Verlaine or Théophile Gautier. *Offrande* on the verses of Paul Verlaine resembles a sonorous painting. The intimate atmosphere of the poem is emphasized by a simple musical discourse, which lacks dynamic contrasts and sudden changes, as well as through the use of the middle register of the singing voice. The melody carefully follows the words of Verlaine's poem, while the accompaniment consists only of harmonic "pillars", which support the musical discourse and deepen the color of each word (*E.g.* 2). Yet these colors also come to life through the singer's approach of the poem and the music of this *Mémoire*.

E.g. 2

The musical score for 'Offrande' by Reynaldo Hahn, measures 1-4, is presented in two systems. The first system shows the vocal line (CHANT) and the piano accompaniment (PIANO). The tempo is marked 'Pas trop lent.' and the dynamics are 'pp' and 'p'. The lyrics are: 'Voici des'. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment with the lyrics: 'fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches, Et'. The piano accompaniment consists of simple harmonic structures, primarily triads and dyads, supporting the vocal melody.

Reynaldo Hahn: *Offrande*, m. 1-4.

In a very similar manner *Infidélité*, on the verses of Théophile Gautier evokes a space filled with memories. In this *Mélodie* as well the evocative character of the sonorous image Hahn recreates is ascribable to the way in which the melody aims to bring to life the music which lies hidden beyond each word. The composer avoids the use of large intervals, the gradual ascension and descent of the melody resemble the delicate flow of the recitation. The flowers and the trees are musically depicted, each of these words is wrapped in a sensitive garment through the use of harmony and melody. The piano accompaniment evokes the slow and repeated sound of bells tolling, a peaceful and serene ambience beyond time and space (E.g. 3). The poem recalls a physical space where nothing has changed, but the absence of the person associated with the surrounding objects. Beyond the appearance of serenity, tranquil sadness and silent resignation can be sensed, which occasionally outburst in the upward leaps of the vocal melody (E.g. 4).

E.g. 3

Le banc de pier - re où, le soir, Nous ai - mions

dim. à nous as - soir.

Reynaldo Hahn: *Infidélité*, m. 10-14.

E.g. 4

The musical score consists of two systems. Each system has a vocal line on a single staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are: "de li - las OÙ, lors-que nous é - tions las, En - - sem - ble, ma bien ai -". The vocal line includes dynamic markings "cresc." and "espress.". The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line with chords in the right hand.

Reynaldo Hahn: *Infidélité*, m. 17-20.

***Mélo*dies and poets**

To provide the reader with a clear perspective regarding the poets whose verses Reynaldo Hahn used when composing his vocal miniatures, in the following, several collections of Hahn's *Mélo*dies shall be enumerated. However, this list is not exhaustive. Understanding the poet, performer and audience alike can have a more profound perception of the composer's ideas regarding the choice for certain musical constructions, harmonies, rhythmic patterns, intervals, etc.

Table 1

| Year | Title | Poet |
|-----------|--|---|
| 1887-1890 | <i>7 Chansons Grises</i> | Paul Verlaine |
| 1888-1896 | <i>20 Mélodies</i> (1st volume) | Victor Hugo, François Coppée, André Theuriet, Théodore de Banville, Théophile Gautier, Paul Verlaine, Alphonse Daudet, Gabriel Vicaire, Léon Dierx, Armand Renaud, Heinrich Heine, Jean Lahor, Leconte de Lisle, |
| 1896-1921 | <i>20 Mélodies</i> (2nd volume) | Victor Hugo, Jean Racine, M ^{me} Blanchecotte, Jean Moréas, Catulle Mendès, Charles d'Orleans, Maurice Magre, Sully Prudhomme, Théodore de Banville, Henri de Régnier, Théophile de Viau, Léopold Dauphin, Louis Hennevé, Hélène Vacaresco, Maurice Magre, Guillot de Saix |
| 1898-1899 | <i>12 Rondels</i> | Théodore de Banville, Catulle Mendès, Charles d'Orleans, |
| 1901 | <i>Venezia</i> (6 <i>chansons</i> in Venetian dialect) | Pietro Pagello, Pietro Buratti, Antonio Lamberti, Francesco dall' Ongaro, Alvise Cigogna |
| 1901-1906 | <i>Les feuilles blessées</i> | Jean Moréas |
| 1904 | <i>Amour sans ailes</i> | Agnes Mary Frances Robinson |
| 1915 | <i>5 Petite chansons</i> | Robert Louis Stevenson, Maurice Léna |

It is interesting to note that towards the end of the 19th-century and the beginning of the 20th-century, apart from the inspiration they sought from the works of the symbolist poets, French composers turned their attention towards the poetry of the middle-ages or the Renaissance. However, their approach regarding the distant past was different from that of the Romantic composers, as can be perceived from the musical language composers such as Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Reynaldo Hahn or George Enescu employ in their vocal miniatures. The composer evades to a remote time and space, yet does so without expressing complex emotions through sonorous excesses, but rather through refined “suggestions” and the use of a musical language reminiscent of the modes employed in the Middle-Ages.

Ravel and Enescu chose to compose on the verses of Renaissance poet Clément Marot (1496-1544), while Hahn composed *rondels* on the verses of the medieval poet Charles d’Orleans (1394-1465). In all the cases the relationship between poetry and music is of utmost importance. The medieval and Renaissance images harmoniously blend with a musical language which is old and new at the same time, due to the use of musical modes and a gradual alienation from tonal harmony.

Regarding Enescu’s *Sept chansons de Clement Marot op.15*, composed in 1908, Noel Malcom observes: “*Poeziile de dragoste diferă între ele: unele sunt în stilul glumeț preferat de Marot altele poartă amprenta inimii zdrobite a lui Petrarca. Enescu explorează această gamă de emoții, păstrând însă peste tot același idiom muzical. Umorele galice sprințar alternează cu reveria specifică lui Fauré. Muzica are un colorit în care se vede un soi de arhaism tandru. (The love poems vary: some are written in the witty style much preferred by Marot, while others recall the heartbroken Petrarca. Enescu explores this entire variety of emotions, yet he retains the same musical idiom throughout the vocal cycle. Humorous traits alternate with a reverie specific for Fauré. The music has a particular colour which evokes a certain tender archaism.)*”⁶

Similar to Enescu, in his *Mélodies* Reynaldo Hahn employs a wide range of emotions and colours, his particular style can be traced in his vocal miniatures, regardless of the poet whose works he sets to music.

The Singing Voice in Hahn’s *Mélodies*

The importance of the language, the supremacy of the spoken word, greatly influenced Hahn’s conception of his songs. Analyzing the expressive

⁶ Malcolm, Noel. *George Enescu: Viața și muzica (George Enescu: His Life and Music)*, Ed. Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 104

power of a singer's performance, Stark states the following: "*Part of the power of expression, of course, is due to the presence of words, which convey their own meaning. But aside from linguistic communication, there is another level of expression that comes from the cultivated vocal techniques (described above).*"⁷ In the *mélodies* of Reynaldo Hahn, due to the composer's thorough knowledge regarding the singing voice (the composer himself was a singer), this *power of expression* is the result of the harmonious conjunction between words, music and specific use of the singing voice.

Hahn believes that singing is an extension of speech, an amplified expression of the spoken words. The composer believes that the words one sings are already emphasized by the music which provides these words with an infinite variety of shades, thus the singer must be careful not to overemphasize the emotions of the musical performance: "*Le chant est déjà par lui-même une hypertrophie du langage parlé; il agit comme un verre grossissant et confère aux mots usuels, même chantés sans expression, une importance souvent excessive. Par le seul fait que les mots ordinaires sont chantés, ils apparaissent transformés, agrandis, ou tout au moins soulignés. Il faut donc garder l'expression pour le moment où l'on doit donner à l'accent une signification plus profonde, une puissance plus active et même alors la doser avec soin.*"⁸

Through his music, Hahn strives to evoke the most hidden sounds, colours, meanings of the words. For the composer *honesty*, a *truthful* musical representation is of utmost importance, for the true meaning of the words can only be revealed if they are enveloped in musical truth. This approach lies at the basis of Hahn's creation: "*La musique est alors révélation d'un sémantisme plus ou moins latent; en ce sens, elle met en œuvre une démarche «étymologique», puisque étymologie signifie, étymologiquement, «sens vrai». Ce concept est important chez Hahn, qui affirme aussi que «Le chant n'est beau [...] que s'il arrive, par une multitude harmonieuse et insaisissable d'allusions et, pour ainsi dire, de ramifications étymologiques, à des suggestions précises» (...)*"⁹

In his *mélodies* Hahn often chooses to employ the middle register of the singing voice, due to the expressive power of this register, which resembles most closely the spoken voice. Also, the composer avoids the use of an extended vocal range, focusing rather on expression than virtuosity.

⁷ Stark, James A. *Bel Canto: A History of Vocal Pedagogy*, University of Toronto Press Incorporated - Toronto, 2008, p. 188.

⁸ Hahn, Reynaldo. *L'oreille au guet*, Librairie Gallimard – Paris, 1937, p. 276.

⁹ De Villeneuve, Roselyne. *Reynaldo Hahn et le chant significatif: réflexions intersémiotiques sur la musique vocale et la pratique de la comédie musicale - Musurgia*, 2016, vol. XXIII/1-3 «Linguistique, rhétorique, stylistique, musique», p. 67-85, DOI 10.3917/musur.161.0067, p. 70 – 71.

Dynamic contrasts develop naturally, as a result of the particularities of each register of the voice: the occasional upward leaps or phrases sung in the high register are more vibrant, more piercing by nature of this register, while the lower and middle regions of the voice produce warm, velvety sounds which enfold the words in their rich, sensual aura. Hahn strives for simplicity, thus allowing the profound meaning beyond each word to be revealed through an unadorned vocal melody: *“L’écriture laisse la voix à découvert et lui fait épouser une ligne vocale minimale, à l’ambitus restreint, qui se limite le plus souvent à un recto tono sur un rythme régulier. (...) Par son économie de moyens, en laissant simplement sourdre l’humaine poésie, elle tend davantage vers une mise en résonance d’un état d’âme original que vers une expression additionnelle, trop singulière, de celui-ci.”*¹⁰

Conclusions

Despite the rapid and complex changes unfolding at the end of the 19th-century and the beginning of the 20th-century, Reynaldo Hahn will strive, throughout his career, to write music which is able to evoke the sensitive and pure beauty of the human soul. In this aspect, he resembles his master, Jules Massenet, whose works are in effect musical representations of the dreams, ideals and longings of the women and men portrayed through his characters. By entering the world of Hahn’s *mélodies* the performer and the audience alike are transported to a serene surrounding, beyond time and space, although these works are at the same time a vivid portrait of the composer’s era.

The music of these *mélodies* imitates the construction of the spoken phrases, therefore the performer who desires to approach Hahn’s vocal miniatures must, before anything else, approach the poem which lies at the core of the musical piece. Only by understanding the subtle connections between words and silence can the music be rendered alive and truthful, as Hahn would have desired.

¹⁰ Blay, Philippe; Branger, Jean-Christophe; Fraise, Luc. *Marcel Proust et Reynaldo Hahn – Une création à quatre mains*, Classiques Garnier – Paris, 2018, p. 143.

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