

Françoise Tillard

Ideological prejudice in the approach to French songs
University of the Arts, Taiwan, November 2012

Having been asked to talk about French songs to a Taiwanese audience, I had to look for a thread that could allow me to tell you what I wanted to communicate that you couldn't find in books.

Good books have been written on French songs. I can mention Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion*[\[1\]](#), and *Le Guide de la Mélodie et du Lied*[\[2\]](#), edited by Brigitte François-Sappey and Gilles Cantagrel, both of which we currently use in France.

Here you may start to understand the title of this lecture, and the beginning of a question: why no book in France on French song for its own sake? Why a "Guide for Lied AND Melody"? Why should French art so much depend on German?

Other questions would right away appear: is the translation of "song" *mélodie* or *chanson*? When did the concept of French song arise? In the Middle Ages or just after birth of the German Lied? What does it have to do with the latter? Epigon or response?

These are questions I had to ask myself all my life. As a young musician, I was first attracted to German Lied. This is how I started, and the reason why I became a "collaborative pianist". I discovered the beauty of the combination of text and music with Schubert, Schumann and Wolf.

I must add that I was brought up hating anything German. My father went to Mauthausen concentration camp and wrote quite a few books about it. He died of the after-effects of the camp when I was still a girl. The discovery of Lieder was therefore quite a bomb in my life. But it didn't lead me right away to French repertoire. French songs were not known in my family, not mentioned at school, despised by my music teachers, and ridiculed by French society at large.

So I followed the thread first by going to study in London, quite a neutral field, where I first heard that French composers (Debussy, Fauré, Ravel, Poulenc) were just as great as German composers. This is one of the reasons why I wanted to do this lecture in English: the English deserve to call French composers their own. About this topic, it's healthier for me to think in English.

After England I went to Austria, played for great artists and worked for them as a coach (Christa Ludwig, Herbert von Karajan), my knowledge of languages being of use. Much later, I wrote my dissertation on Fanny Hensel, sister of the composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, and I perceived then how organised German history was: not a book without references, without indexes... Musikwissenschaft is a German discovery, the whole 19th Century is sorted out as far as they are concerned. The bibliography of my dissertation was in fact quite an easy business.

The research on French music of the 19th Century has just started... The Institute of Musicology of the Paris Sorbonne opened in 1970... Until now, French musicologists were not very interested, neither in 19th Century music, nor in text put into music. Hard luck for French songs altogether.

So, if it wasn't for the outside demand, mostly from England, America, and now the eastern countries, Japan and China first, there would be in France disrespect for French music.

My title and my questions may seem to you a little negative. But in fact the result of this constraint is amazingly beautiful and rich, as if it served the music to look for new ways of expression.

Why is that? Where does it come from? Of course what I am going to suggest is hypothetical.

It runs through the literature of the 18th and 19th Centuries that the French are one of the most musical peoples. Everyone sings, at work, at leisure... "En France, tout finit par des chansons" writes Beaumarchais, "everything ends in songs". Nowadays the same people think that music is not in their inheritance. Again, what happened?

My belief is that political instability starting from the French Revolution brought confusion. At first, music was not at all involved: the same composers could be in one camp or the other; the text made the difference, not the music. Still, one had to be careful not to belong to the previous period -- "l'ancien régime". Later, musical styles became adopted by different social classes: Italian opera by the aristocracy, comic opera by the bourgeoisie, resulting in the quality of music becoming less important than its style.

Then primary education became compulsory for everyone, and from the schools, music-making was totally absent. It gave French educated people a growing feeling of the vacuity of musical education, as something totally useless. Music belonged to a useless class of salon goers, not to working and useful people.

That's from inside. From outside came very strongly what German musicians had to say about France. Music making and musical education became increasingly important in Germany during the 18th Century, as we can see in *le Voyage musical dans l'Europe des Lumières* by Charles Burney^[3]. It was quite clear for people like Zelter, Goethe or Schiller that music could be the means of uniting a folk otherwise split in small parcels. The problem didn't exist in France, where the national feeling didn't need music to build a community of interest. There grew a misunderstanding about the role of music-making in France or in Germany. For France, where thousands of concerts were happening in the first half of the 19th Century, it was a social occasion, a way of being happy together while admiring virtuoso playing or singing. For German composers like Mendelssohn, Schumann or Wagner, this was shallow and not respectful enough of their creative powers.

It should also be said that Germany was poor in tradition compared to France or Italy, and it had to assert itself, using some aggressiveness and untruth.

Music publishing was at that time almighty, very rich and strong. Publishers supported their composers... and it came about that light music lost to serious music. The interesting point is that when Wagner or Brahms wrote of their disdain for anything French, the French themselves believed them... Wagnerism was strong in everyone's mind until the 1980's. Then, somehow, it faded away and everyone started to consider Wagner as one good composer among many.

Wagnerism in France is quite an issue, and an ideology in itself. Combined with French nationalism, it may indeed lead to oddities.

One should not forget the French tendency to centralism. At first, the king was taking charge of the general taste, and that worked in a way. This was called "colbertisme", after the name of Louis XIV's minister. After the French Revolution, it took the name of "jacobinisme", after the name of the political movement that made Paris the center of French thinking. In that respect, when no king's taste is there to control who sings what, music making becomes a kind of anarchy, and the governing ones hated that. But this anarchy was certainly very healthy for composers, and probably one of the reasons for the quality of the French repertoire.

World War II didn't help. The German occupation introduced the practice of singing in German at the Opéra de Paris, a practice which continued after the war as far as German operas were concerned. The conviction that music was a German asset remained in the French background, and that, combined with French guilt feelings about their collaboration with the Nazis, led to a thorough dislike of their musical past.

The fact that serious music should be good, good music was German, and Germans being considered as serious brought everything into a full and repetitive circle.

Berlioz (1803-1869) is in that respect the eccentric whom one cannot really classify. A Forerunner, an early Wagnerian?

So music is not listened to as good or bad, but as fulfilling the requirement of being good if serious and German. The fact that Germany stopped producing good German music in the first half of the 20th Century meant that good and serious German music was also classical or romantic, and that good music belonged to the past.

That's what I mean by "ideological prejudice": it is when you stop listening to what's happening in reality, it is when you know after a couple of notes that what you are listening to is the right or wrong type of music, and when you decide before the end of the piece if you like it or not.

Good music being serious and German excludes all folk music from the field. Even Beethoven is not entitled to write folk songs. And he wrote around 170 of them! Which are hardly played or understood. Just because he is not supposed not to be serious...

In short the prejudices are:

- The French are not musical
- Light music can't be good
- Good music belongs to the past

The wonder is that there is still a wide repertoire of wonderful French songs to talk about.

So, what happens to our songs?

A song is a text set to music. As you know, the translation to "French song" is not "chanson française", but "mélodie". That's already ideology moving on. Originally, "mélodie" just means tune. The word appears at the middle of the 19th Century precisely to balance the concept of "Lied" which had become so noble on the other side of the river Rhine^[4].

It is about from that time that we want to start our investigation. I shall be then not just enumerating the composers who did a good job in the field of French songs, but also looking for the original way they had to find for themselves between light and serious music. I am not going to be thorough about every French song composer; I shall just mention a few of them, and stop at those whom I think significant for my purpose.

This beginning of French "mélodie" is in no way in opposition to the German Lied, but on the contrary, is full of love and admiration. French audiences knew of Schubert and Schumann through singers like Adolphe Nourrit, and later Pauline Viardot who sang the songs in French translation.

Music all over Europe at that time was becoming increasingly difficult technically. That applies to the voice to a certain extent, although a human voice is limited, certainly much more than a piano or any other instrument. It meant that the style of the songs was becoming more and more professional.

In a good song, the balance between text and music must remain simple and not sound technical. The audience must effortlessly be aware of every aspect of the piece: the meaning of the text, the tune, and the piano part, whatever it may be.

So the French musicians first interested in composing songs inspired by the German art had to keep that in mind. They knew their audience, accustomed to theatre and salon music, which had little to do with the church music behind the Lied.

What is most important for the quality of a song in any language is the text: it has not only to be good, but also to relate to the composer in his most intimate artistry. Sometimes too heavy, too "good" a text will not inspire the composer, who will prefer a more modest poem. On the other hand, most songs or operas

suffer from too weak a libretto or poetry, so the composer has to be careful not to waste his time and artistry.

Salons

The first composer openly influenced by German music is, of course, Gounod. He met with it when in Rome, where he spent a lot of time with Fanny Hensel, elder sister of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and a composer in her own right. She introduced Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn's piano music to him, which opened a new world to the young man. From that time one can date the famous *Ave Maria*, where Gounod composed a tune over Bach Prelude I from the first book of the 48 Preludes and Fugues. That is a case where the piano part was composed well before the tune.

Gounod was a very gifted musician, but not a very strong character, so he didn't have the morality to follow his real taste for church music. The Mendelssohns thought that he represented the future of church music in France, but he preferred earning lots of money in opera. A few of his songs are good, sincere, with the advantage of simplicity. Sometimes too much so, and his choice of texts is too often conventional. He wants to push himself socially, thinking that he is the French Mozart.

Gounod is the leader of a whole generation of salon composers. This music was much in demand, played and sung by many amateur artists. The idea of this music is also that it should be sung and played by the same person. The great singer Pauline Viardot (1821-1910) used to perform her delightful songs from the piano. Lalo (1823-1892) is very often simple enough in that respect. Bizet (1838-1875) however is more demanding, seeking a good balance between an intelligent text and an independent piano part. *Les Adieux de l'Hôtesse arabe* on a text by Victor Hugo, although not showing off, is one of the greatest songs of the repertoire, with a discreetly percussive piano part, expressive of the incantation the singer wants to work on the listener.

It would be difficult to mention all this salon music, and not very useful, because it is hardly ever performed. The great opera composer Massenet (1842-1912) wrote piles of them, earning lots of money and adding to the prejudice that all this salon music is not interesting. It is a very unfair judgment of some of it. Reynaldo Hahn (1875-1947) who, like Pauline Viardot, used to sing while playing, has in recent years come back into fashion. His choice of texts indeed made this comeback possible: lots of Verlaine, but also Victor Hugo (*Quand la nuit n'est pas étoilée, Si mes vers avaient des ailes*), Théophile Gautier, Alphonse Daudet...

Relation to ancient music

Apart from the prevalence of salon music, which tied the so-called "mélodie" to an operatic style, there was at that time a more serious movement relating the song to church music and ancient music. It was initiated by a not very well known composer named Louis Niedermeyer (1802-1861). Although Saint-Saëns pretended he was the first to write what could be called a "Mélodie", no longer a "romance" of which the music would be unrelated to the text, he is remembered only as the founder of the Niedermeyer school where Saint-Saëns taught the young Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) and André Messager (1853- 1929).

Again you can see in the foundation of that school a will to establish a more lasting basis for a music otherwise light and subject to the decisions of the market. The aim of that school, which opened 1853, was to reinitiate a real study of ancient music, which was not called yet "Baroque music", but "the masters of the past": Palestrina, Bach... Not far from the work of a Mendelssohn Bartholdy in Germany.

That was the schooling Fauré (1845-1924) received from the age of 8. His piano teacher was Saint-Saëns, who always remained a close friend, and close to his musical preoccupations. The fact that he was, while very young, in contact with church modes that had nothing whatsoever to do with salon, opera or concert music of that time makes his style unique.

Fauré is probably the best-known composer of French songs; therefore I am not going to say much about his life. To my purpose, I shall only say that his music is said to be "salon music" in a derogatory way, where we know that the foundation is music of the church.

Fauré's song writing doesn't look for big effects. He seems to obey inner rules, unrelated to what the establishment or the market would demand of composers. One doesn't know much about his life; he was very discreet but not tortured by the unhealthy commands of the Catholic religion. Love affairs he had, although one can only guess the real truth. That makes his music very openly sensuous; one only has to respect his tempo markings and general indications to become aware of the pulse and liveliness lying under very restrained writing.

He certainly wrote songs to be performed in salons, where else? Some of them are just a perfect balance of what a song should be: a sensitive text effortlessly understood, while the piano part underlines the point of this text and nothing is lost, either of singing, or of the right or left hand.

Fauré wrote much more difficult songs toward the end of his life. He was practically deaf then, with a strong aural disorder. This supposedly too easy composer turned to obscurity in *La Chanson d'Eve*, obliging the audience to listen and listen again to something unexpected. His last song cycle, *L'Horizon chimérique* (1921), however, comes back to a more popular way of writing: simple, unaffected and sensitive.

His friend Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) also wrote melodies that are not all of the level above salon music, but that suffer all from the same prejudice. His settings of Victor Hugo in particular are first class music: *la Fiancée du Timbalier*, *Attente*, *la Cloche*, *Le Pas d'Armes du Roi Jean* should be more often performed. With Camille Saint-Saëns we see an remarkable instance of prejudice: considered a revolutionary man in his youth, defending instrumental music against the ruling Italian opera, he became, towards the end of his life, representative of a style of music that belonged to a past one didn't accept anymore.

Wagnerism

We get now to the composers who bowed to the Wagner operas to the point of not being able to compose after him... Of course that didn't happen only to

French composers.

You get a very strong instance of ideological tensions leading to masterpieces with the composer Henri Duparc (1848-1933). Duparc was a passionate French nationalist, and a no less passionate Wagner admirer. That went indeed to a clash. The 1870 war split the relations between France and Germany, otherwise rich. Duparc had a nervous disorder, not understood by the medicine of that time, which prevented him from continuing to compose after 1885. 17 songs remain to us; the rest of his work he burned.

They are definitely post Wagnerian, some of them even quoting tunes. *Élégie* sounds like *Traüme*. Although they sound as if they belong to an orchestral style, and some of them are indeed orchestrated, I prefer those songs with piano, where the clarity of the text and of the prosody is better respected.

It was obviously very difficult for Duparc to keep both of his standards, and combine the shamelessly complicated composing style of Wagner with the fluidity required by a song. In his own opinion, he was successful only 17 times, leaving us 17 jewels.

Chausson (1855-1899) suffers today from texts that we don't understand. *Le Temps des Lilas* (Maurice Bouchor) and *La Chanson perpétuelle* are supposed to be masterpieces, but if you look closely at what the text says you have a problem. I much prefer *Le Colibri* (Lecomte de Lisle) or *Les Heures* (Camille Mauclair) where singer and pianist can put themselves behind what is said.

I want to draw your attention to a less-known musician who wrote some of the best vocal music, and without whom Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc would not exist (so they said): Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894). He belongs to the Wagner fans, discovering the composer with Duparc and later sharing the passion with Vincent d'Indy. But he knew how to remain personal: the influence of his home country, the Auvergne, remained very strong. So he developed a style where the most daring harmonies remain masked by simplicity and a great sense of humour.

He was a lawyer and worked at the Home Office until 1880, when he resigned to devote himself to composition. He was known as a great pianist and improviser, but his friends were nevertheless worried about him: he was still considered an amateur, a self-taught man who had never visited the big institutions, except for studying law. The piano pieces he wrote are brilliant and imaginative, Poulenc said of the *Pièces pittoresques* that they were as important to French music as the *Préludes* of Debussy.

He published six songs in 1890, a short time before illness prevented him from working. *Ballade des gros Dindons*, *Pastorale des Cochons roses*, *Villanelle des petits Canards* and *Les Cigales* on texts of the poets' couple Edmond Rostand and Rosemonde Gérard are unique instances of very sophisticated music on hilarious and biting texts. One cannot imagine les *Histoires naturelles* if they had not existed: as musicians, we are very often confined to an expression of lyricism, sentimentality and passion that leaves out any "normal" human feeling for reality and intelligence. These songs are a big break towards realism.

Chanson pour Jeanne (Catulle Mendès) is supposed to have been Ravel's favourite song. *Toutes les Fleurs* (Edmond Rostand) and *L'Isle heureuse* (Ephraïm Mikhael) are masterpieces. *Lied* (Catulle Mendès) doesn't have much German about it: light, fun, a perfect "divertissement" for grown up people.

Other songs of Chabrier were not published until after his death: only in 1913. *L'Invitation au Voyage*, which he didn't want to push because he thought that the setting by Duparc was so good... which is true. It is nevertheless a very interesting setting, with obligato bassoon, which is rare in romantic music. It is even more strongly evocative of the "artificial paradises" of opium than the Duparc setting is. The bassoon notes adds an uncanny atmosphere to the recitative of the singer over the arpeggios of the piano. The two Victor Hugo settings, *Sommation irrespectueuse* and *Ruy Blas*, and *Tes Yeux bleus* on a poem by Maurice Rollinat are exceptional songs. In this last song, as in Duparc's *Élégie*, the quotation of Wagner *Traüme* is quite transparent. It is a pity that the text should be so poor.

It should be noted that Chabrier was a friend of Verlaine, that he knew the best writers and painters in Paris, that he had a strong taste for theatre, literature and art of all kind... But it was obviously difficult for him to compose on a text he respected too much. The Rostands seem to have been just the good balance for him.

What emerges from this period of Wagner fanaticism are precisely those songs that didn't want to prove something. All the students of César Franck (1822-1890), who himself wrote very few songs, such as Vincent d'Indy (1851-1931) or Guy Ropartz (1864-1955), want to demonstrate that a French composer can write Wagnerian music. This doesn't mean much to us to day. The texts often betray big feelings without much sincerity.

All these composers suffer more or less from the pressure of a mighty establishment: the world of Italian opera, the Wagnerism and later the "Ars Gallica", defence of the French composers of instrumental music, and in the middle of a world looking for pleasure and money, the very power hungry local Roman Catholicism. This last one preyed heavily on almost all of them, above all on Duparc, Chausson, and later Messiaen.

Another world, other ideas from elsewhere had to come to give a new breath, a new freedom to these artists.

They resorted to outside influences: folk music, the exotic, Russian music, antiquity, poetry of the Middle Ages or Renaissance...

When composers, from France or elsewhere, got tired of too much sound and too big feelings, they turned towards simple tunes, or what they would call their roots.

This is one of the interesting aspects of Chabrier, and where he showed the way to most 20th Century composers, Ravel first of all: he looked for the tunes of his native country, the Auvergne and surroundings, and harmonized them with respect but also imagination.

That was, later, the research of Maurice Emmanuel (1862-1938), with harmonisation a bit too distinctive but still very lively. You may include Joseph Canteloube (1879-1957) and Maurice Ravel (1875- 1937) among those looking for a sound that is not more operatic or even rossinian, who considered that a folk tune has richness and originality that can give new strength to an aging world of sound. Maurice Delage (1879-1961) looked towards Indian music to enrich his language.

The very strange composer Erik Satie (1866-1925) influenced strongly all the newcomers by forbidding any gush of sentimentality. To this day, we don't know if he meant seriously all the music he wrote, or if he was pulling our legs forever...

I wonder whether Debussy (1862-1918) started as big a revolution as Satie. Debussy very much composed the way he wanted; I don't know whether his point was to change the musical world.

He was the one who introduced pentatonic scales to western music. He looked in every direction where sensuality was to be found, assuming that western rules were boring.

If we look at his work from the point of view we have been following, he was as much inspired and "prejudiced" by Wagner as any other composer was. Like Wagner, he wrote the texts of his 4 *Proses lyriques* (1892-1893), showing the same tendency to megalomania. The third one in particular, *De Fleurs*, shows in the text and in the shape of the musical phrases that the composer had *Im Treibhaus* in mind. The sun that is so much to be feared (*Ami des fleurs mauvaises, tueur de rêves, tueur d'illusions...*) is the same one Tristan so hates.

Debussy tried also, like a German composer, to compose to big texts: The *Cinq Poèmes de Charles Baudelaire* are great and interesting music, but the texts are too big and the music too complicated, the audience is amazed but not quite happy... This is a case where the poetry stands on its own, doesn't need music. To do justice to the greatness of the poet, the composer uses all his skills, and the point is lost: the text becomes unclear, and one doesn't listen to the music.

I guess Debussy found a better balance between Verlaine and himself, writing one wonderful song after the other: *Ariettes oubliées*, two volumes of *Fêtes galantes*... Still, I feel that sometimes, his happiness while making music and his obvious pleasure in playing the piano don't do justice to the very dark bitterness of Verlaine's poetry, in *C'est l'Extase*, for instance. Then the question is, do you want to hear Debussy, or do you want Verlaine?

Then Debussy, like Chabrier, like Victor Hugo, looked outside France for his inspiration, and composed *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* on texts by Pierre Louÿs which were a purported translation from the Greek (in fact by Louÿs himself). They were scandalous, the texts and the music, (the story of a girl's introduction to sex) as were the lives of the poet and the musician.

One notices the use of the word "Chanson", as if "Mélodie" was not the fashion anymore.

Debussy never tried to please anyone other than himself. So it is no wonder if his songs got more and more introverted as Debussy grew older and lost his friends, who disapproved of his private life. *Trois Chansons de France* (Charles d'Orléans, Tristan l'Hermite), *Le Promenoir des deux Amants* (Tristan l'Hermite) -- indeed Debussy is not looking for inspiration in fashionable poetry, but far in the past. That is what he is doing also in *Trois Ballades de François Villon*, his only songs for male voice. Here is no question of songs or melodies, but the "ballades" mean to be timeless. They are difficult to understand, not so much because of the music than because of old-fashioned French. As to the *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1912), neither music nor text is supposed to be easily accessible.

What is important in Debussy, and he was in that respect greatly influenced by Massenet's operas, is his prosody. Until that time, French was set in a metric that was sort of all right for German or Italian, where the composers could accommodate the beats to the language. But in French, the so-called tonic accent is at the end of the sentence, regardless of what is being said. That is, the accent is at the end of the word, or, at the end of the group of words, or, at the end of the sentence. It means that marking the first beat is absolutely prohibited in French music, more than in any other music.

Debussy also made extensive use of triplets, which shouldn't be emphasized as they would be in German: to speak in triplets is natural for the French, not specially expressive.

All that leads to a more realistic way of speaking while singing. Nevertheless, although it sounds quite logical and necessary, it doesn't appeal to the audience as much as big arias do.

That brings us to the unique *Histoires naturelles* that Ravel (1875- 1937) composed in 1906 to texts by Jules Renard. They were as scandalous as was, later, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. One talks about the novelty of his suppression of the mute e that hitherto composers had put into music. Think of Fauré writing long notes on this e. I can't believe that an 'e' could be such an issue. I think that what was scandalous about the *Histoires naturelles* is that they are absolutely void of lyrical feeling.

This was new, absolutely "unromantic" and antiwagnerian. Ravel let himself be inspired by folk music of all countries, by poets of the past (Clément Marot and Ronsard), by Debussy of course, by Satie and the Russian composers (most of all Mussorgsky) who also greatly influenced Debussy and later Poulenc.

So we are in a world where the greatest composers don't communicate well with their audience... The western world broke up and that was World War I. Patriotism is a great feeling that was compulsory at the time, and one can understand that the establishment accepted not at all the renunciation of "great feelings" in music.

The artistic world that followed this big outburst of feeling was necessarily mistrustful of feeling. But it was not easy for creators to find a way of being honest with themselves while keeping in peace with the audience who massively

rejected the dryness of "modern music".

Roussel (1869-1937) is one of those composers who wrote too heavy music on too heavy texts. Still, I want to mention one of the most beautiful French songs ever written. Roussel wrote *La Réponse d'une épouse sage* on a Chinese poem by Chang Chi (710-782) translated by Henri-Pierre Roché. Here again, a French artist looks outside his world for an antidote to sentimentalism. The "honest wife" is also honest with herself and the music, influenced by eastern art, is moving while remaining restrained, not expressing "big feelings".

One poet had a very special influence on music: Jean Cocteau (1889- 1963).

Jean Cocteau belonged to an upper class family which did not succeed in making him study properly law or whatever. He remained all his life apart from ordered society. He was gifted for so many things that it is still common to reproach him for investigating too many fields of art: not only poetry, but also movie making and painting. Still, the fact that he didn't have to please anyone else than himself and that he refused to be attached to one ideology gives him today his full value as an artist. He was open, artistically candid, and enthusiastic for other people's work. Still, he didn't want to be closed inside a movement or an ideology and didn't belong to the Surrealists.

He is known to have gathered around him, together with Satie, the rather disparate "Groupe des Six". Now, they were extremely different, but Cocteau's poetry pushed them to write some of their best vocal music. He had learned the lesson of lightness, and Milhaud, Honegger, Durey, Auric, Tailleferre didn't compose heavy music on his texts. Still, it was not music to please the audience...

Poulenc is very close to Cocteau, and his independence from the establishment became his best asset. Again, I shall not talk about someone so widely known. I shall just underline the fact that he is still not acknowledged in France as one of the greatest song composers who ever existed, just because he didn't care to follow the official French routes, the Conservatoire and the Grand Prix de Rome. He remained true to the texts he composed, changing his composing style according to the poetry: his music is not the same for Eluard or for Cocteau, for Apollinaire or for Louise de Vilmorin.

What is for me very special is his gift of transformation, not getting closed inside a style: he wrote the most spiritual church music, and could still be daringly saucy, as in the *Chansons Gaillardes*. Inside an ideologically dominated world, he could be clearly right wing by his name, family and connections, and still be honest and set Eluard, Aragon or Maurice Fombeure because their texts found a reflection in himself, whatever their literary value was.

The *Quatre Chansons pour les Enfants* are highly stupid and thoroughly enjoyable. This way Poulenc can win any audience.

His wish was to remain popular, close to his audience. It must have been difficult for him to live, being, like Cocteau, considered an amateur. He listened to serial music, but couldn't be brought to compose according to so abstract a method

and refused to get closed inside that ideology.

To cut a long story short...

I won't talk about what the serial musicians might have decided to compose to texts. I don't find it very useful for our concert programs, where after all we have to convince an audience that already does not favor serious music. Texts and music are too heavy for me. As far as 20th Century music is concerned I find it better to investigate good popular songs.

We have to admit it is a fight to win acceptance for so good a composer as Joseph Kosma (1905-1969). Kosma came to France in the 30s with the idea of finding a poet he could work with as Kurt Weill had worked with Brecht. He found Prévert and for the next 20 years both wrote the most beautiful and effective songs of these years, as good and effective as Poulenc's. They became famous after the Liberation, as a manifestation of the spirit of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the 50s. They met with the same problem as did Kurt Weill's songs: too difficult for popular singers to sing as written, in the right key, and too popular for art singers... Still, popular singers performed them sometimes with "arrangements" spoiling the music, but so-called "classical" singers didn't rush to call this music their own.

Of course some of them did: Régine Crespin always liked to sing light songs, but I never heard of her stepping forward to record them. On the other hand the great Austrian singers Irmgard Seefried and Gerald Stolze recorded them for the Radio in Köln and had them published in German.

I met with Kosma's widow, Marie Kosma, in my youth, and she gave me Kosma's music with the hope that I could help by giving it to "real" singers. Of course these singers had to have understanding of the text and a real projecting diction, otherwise music and poetry together, that is to say, the song, would be like cold coffee.

How often does one find real singers who are fine recitalists? And does the audience expect it really? Don't they expect real singers not to be understood? Do they listen to the text, in songs or in opera? Isn't it mad to think that the work on the voice, the sort of added value on the organ, means a loss of textual expressivity?

Why do we have to separate the world of music and the world of meaning?

I have in my class a young woman who is writing a dissertation on settings of Rimbaud's poetry. Well, she has of course to work on Britten's settings, that is all right... Otherwise she has to work on unknown contemporary music, and she is to avoid any analysis of songs written by honest popular song writers, unless she mentions it as general opinions around Rimbaud.

That will be my conclusion about the state of ideology around French songs. We have come to a time where our thinking about our repertoire doesn't reflect the true state of things. On the other hand, for a very long time, English speaking

audiences and artists have more accurately received this repertoire than we have. Now, Far Eastern countries are getting interested as well and will have their word to say about what they like to perform and listen to.

I do think we will have to combine both academic and light worlds in order to create songs that sound like us. I know that this may happen, that composers and interpreters are ready for such a move. The future will say...

I didn't mention all composers who suffered from ideological prejudice. Caplet (1875-1925) and Sauguet (1901-1989), like most 20th Century composers, had to follow the dictates, self-imposed or not, of the different movements: surrealism, serialism... They wanted their music to answer an idea, rather than letting it flow. How difficult!

The composers, the artists who succeeded in giving us lasting pleasure in performing and listening to them were quite independent, to the point of being often almost anarchists. I think it was their response to an otherwise too strong musical establishment. Song is a simple form, and free...

As the American composer Leonard Bernstein said, "God loves a simple song". Not only God...

[1] Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion*, Oxford University Press, 2000

[2] *Guide de la Mélodie et du Lied*, edited by Brigitte François--Sappey and Gilles Cantagrel, Fayard, Paris, 1994

[3] Michel Noiray, Charles Burney, *Voyage musical dans l'Europe des Lumières: traduction, préface, notes et index*, Paris, Flammarion, 1992.

[4] Berlioz is probably the first one to use the term with his *Mémoires Irlandaises* (1829).