

*FEMMES DE LÉGENDE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO
PROGRAMMATICISM IN MÉLANIE BONIS'S FEMMES DE LÉGENDE*

by

ANNA GRACE HAWKINS

(Under the Direction of Liza Stepanova)

ABSTRACT

Composer Mélanie Bonis wrote over three hundred musical compositions, few of which have received scholarly attention and analysis. In particular, her collection of seven piano pieces entitled *Femmes de Légende* have been largely neglected despite containing fascinating programmatic implications and innovative musical language. The pieces in *Femmes de Légende* were written between 1898–1913 and are named after famous women from literature: *Mélisande*, *Desdémona*, *Ophélie*, *Viviane*, *Phoebé*, *Salomé*, and *Omphale*. Beyond this obvious programmatic connection, each of these women's narratives connect with and reflect cultural obsessions of Belle Époque France as depicted in the visual art, poetry, literature, and historical accounts of the time. This paper analyzes the music through the lens of programmaticism, illuminating the stories of each woman's origin, her place in Belle Époque France, and Bonis's musical interpretation of and contribution to each woman's narrative.

Chapter one offers an introduction to the project, defining the purpose, rationale, and organization of the paper. Chapter two gives a brief biography of Mélanie Bonis and then discusses the culture of Belle Époque France and the fads of this time. This information dovetails with chapter three, which explores each woman's origin story as well as her role in Bonis's

culture and connection to obsessions of this time. Relevant visual art and literature are included to construct a well-rounded understanding of the many facets of each woman. Chapter four focuses on the music, highlighting noteworthy musical features and how these features capture and suggest each piece's namesake. Chapter five is a practical guide to practicing and performing these pieces.

INDEX WORDS: Mélanie Bonis, *Femmes de Légende*, Mélisande, Desdémona, Ophélie, Viviane, Phoebé, Salomé, Omphale, Belle Époque, Paris, France, *fin-de-siecle*, art, literature, programmaticism, narrative, piano, pedagogy, impressionism, symbolism

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DEDICATION

To Derek Parsons, for truly seeing me and never giving up. Through our coffee walks, blue skies, and life chats, you ignited my passion for how all of life intersects with music and convinced me that perfection is boring.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

Introduction

Mélanie Bonis (1858–1937) was a French composer and pianist. She received her musical training at the Paris Conservatoire but was forced to prematurely withdraw from the Conservatoire due to her parents' opposition to her falling in love with a classmate. Bonis's compositional output slowed considerably around 1883 when she was coerced into marrying Albert Domange, a businessman twenty-five years her senior with no interest in music. During their marriage, she lived a wealthy life in Paris managing the household and bearing and raising children. Approximately eleven years into her marriage, Bonis began an affair with her former classmate from the Conservatoire. This inspired Bonis's return to composing and her adoption of the pseudonym "Mel Bonis" to disguise her gender.¹ In total, Bonis composed more than 300 pieces, including works for piano, chamber ensemble, voice, organ, and orchestra. While Bonis was active in the Parisian musical scene and had pieces published, performed, and recognized during her lifetime, she was largely forgotten after her death.² Only recently has her work begun to be appreciated and programmed.

Rationale

This paper is an exploration of Mélanie Bonis's collection of seven pieces entitled *Femmes de Légende*. Each piece is named after a mythological/literary/Biblical woman:

¹ Judy Tsou, "Bonis, Mélanie (Hélène)," *Grove Music Online*, 2001, <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.00.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000045497>.

² Christine Géliot, "Biography: Mel Bonis, 1858-1937," translated by Florence Launay and Michael Cooke, <https://www.mel-bonis.com/EN/Biographie/>.

Mélisande, Desdémona, Ophélie, Viviane, Phoebé, Salomé, and Omphale. These pieces were written between 1898 and 1913, and while not originally published together, they form a cohesive set due to their overall programmatic nature and celebration of women in particular. This music deserves scholarly research and analysis for three reasons. First, the music is beautiful and fascinating. Bonis's compositional style cannot be fully considered either Romantic or Impressionist, which makes her music complex and unique. Second, the programmatic implications of this collection are compelling and invite the inclusion of visual art, history, and literature to aid in the interpretation of the music. This intersection of various disciplines within Bonis's music mirrors the artistic environment of France at the turn of the century, in which artists were influenced by multiple forms of artistic endeavors. Third, neither Bonis nor this particular set of works has received the scholarship and acclaim that is merited. While *Femmes de Légende* is slowly starting to be performed, it is largely unknown, and there is no scholarly analysis of this musical collection available in English. The wealth of information available on the Belle Époque and the commonly accepted music and composers of that time (Debussy, Ravel, Chabrier, etc.) stands in stark contrast to the dearth of research on Bonis. While Bonis's music fully deserves such academic examination, it has been unjustly excluded from the Western canon.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the rectification of the injustice of Bonis's exclusion and to fill a gaping hole in research on Bonis's music. This paper will contextualize *Femmes de Légende* within the Belle Époque time period by highlighting the connections between *Femmes de Légende* and significant cultural obsessions, interests, and art forms. The programmatic nature of the music will be explored through the lens of historical context,

literature, and art in order to paint a well-rounded portrait of each of the women in Bonis's collection. This historical and programmatic information will then be connected with the music itself and used to inform the interpretation of the music. Finally, pedagogical suggestions will be given to aid teachers and students in successfully selecting and approaching this repertoire that has yet to be analyzed from a pedagogical perspective. Overall, this interdisciplinary approach will provide performers and teachers with an understanding of the music's inspiration and stylistic features and an overview of how to prepare the music for performance.

Literature Review

The shocking lack of scholarly sources on Bonis's music highlights the necessity of this project. There are only two books published on Bonis plus a small collection of articles and letters, all of which are in French. These books are *Mel Bonis, Femme et Compositeur (1858–1937)* by Christine Géliot³ and *Mel Bonis (1858–1937): Parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle Époque*, edited by Étienne Jardin.⁴ There are no scholarly sources or comprehensive biographical material on Bonis available in English; however, there is an English translation of a biographical overview of Bonis on the website⁵ dedicated to Bonis that is maintained by Christine Géliot (Bonis's great-granddaughter). In addition, the preface to the Furore Verlag score⁶ contains scholarly information by Christine Géliot and Eberhard Mayer on Bonis's life, musical style, and *Femmes de Légende*. Unfortunately, the English translation of this information has been truncated compared to the other versions provided in French and German. Very few analyses of Bonis's piano music have been published. In 2020, Rok Palcic completed a final

³ Christine Géliot, *Mel Bonis, Femme et Compositeur (1858-1937)* (Paris: Editions de l'Harmattan, 2009).

⁴ Étienne Jardin, ed., *Mel Bonis (1858-1937): Parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle Époque* (Arles: Aux Editions Actes sud, 2020).

⁵ <https://www.mel-bonis.com/EN/Accueil/>

⁶ Mel Bonis, *Volume 1: Femmes de Légende: Mélisande, Desdémona, Ophélie, Viviane, Phoebé, Salomé, Omphale*, ed. Eberhard Mayer and Christine Géliot (Kassel: Furore Verlag, 2003), 1-15.

DMA project⁷ consisting of recordings of three quarters of Bonis's piano compositions and an accompanying paper that presents biographical information and program notes.

Organization

In order to understand the artistic culture in which Bonis was writing and the literary, artistic, and cultural inspirations behind each piece, chapter two will offer a concise biography of Bonis and then focus on the Belle Époque period and relevant cultural obsessions of this time. Chapter three will trace each woman's literary origin and incorporate artwork related to the subject to provide an overview of each woman's narrative and place in French culture. Chapter four will focus on the music of *Femmes de Légende* and connect the notable musical traits of each piece with the programmatic information provided in chapter three. This musical analysis through the lens of programmaticism will illuminate the narrative nature of the music and highlight Bonis's compositional style and personal interpretation of these famous women. The fifth chapter will provide pragmatic thoughts on teaching the music in order to encourage this collection's incorporation into the teaching repertoire. Overall, this interdisciplinary approach will provide performers and teachers with an understanding of the music's inspiration, stylistic features, and performance challenges and solutions.

⁷ Rok Palcic, "Mel Bonis (1858-1937): Piano Works" (DMA diss., University of Maryland, 2020).

CHAPTER TWO

SETTING THE STAGE: MÉLANIE BONIS AND THE BELLE ÉPOQUE ERA

Biography

Mélanie Bonis (1858–1937) was a French composer and pianist. She received her musical training at the Paris Conservatoire, studying with César Franck and Ernest Guiraud and attending classes with Claude Debussy. Despite winning school prizes for harmony, Bonis was forced to withdraw from the Conservatoire due to her parents' opposition to her falling in love with Amédée Hettich, a fellow student they deemed unsuitable. In 1883, she was coerced into marrying Albert Domange, a businessman twenty-five years older than her with no interest in music. During their marriage, she lived a wealthy life in Paris managing the household and bearing and raising children. As a member of the bourgeois class, she had access to the delights of the rich and innovative social, artistic, and cultural scene of Belle Époque Paris. Her compositional activities were largely pushed aside until she reconnected with Hettich, who urged her to resume her musical activities.

In 1894, Bonis began composing more prolifically, using the name “Mel Bonis” to disguise her gender and avoid sexist prejudice. Bonis and Hettich shared a unique connection, not only in their musical collaborations, but also in their spiritual convictions and passionate love for each other. This connection proved irresistible; she and Hettich began an affair that not only resulted in many musical compositions but also a daughter (born in 1899) that Bonis could never recognize legally.⁸ For the rest of her life, Bonis would struggle to reconcile her strict Catholic

⁸ Jeremy Nicholas, “Mel Bonis: A French Discovery,” *International Piano* No. 98, Dec. 2023, 25.

upbringing and sincerely held moral beliefs with the reality of her affair and deep feelings for Hettich as well as her love for a daughter she could not claim.

In total, Bonis composed more than 300 pieces, including works for piano, chamber ensemble, voice, organ, and orchestra. It is difficult to ascertain the full extent of her reception during her lifetime. Some of her works were published during her lifetime, and a few of her pieces won prizes. Famous musicians of the time such as Ricardo Viñes and Gabriel Pierné performed her works publically, and Bonis became secretary of the *Société des compositeurs de musique*, a position that allowed her to interact with the most famous French musicians and composers of her time.⁹ Camille Saint Saëns was impressed with her work and said of her first piano quartet, “I would never have believed that a woman was capable of writing that. She knew all the tricks of the trade.”¹⁰ Bonis was certainly involved in the Parisian musical scene and enjoyed some success during her life but seems to have been largely forgotten after her death. Only recently has her work begun to be appreciated and programmed.

Between 1898 and 1913, Bonis wrote seven pieces named after mythological/literary/Biblical women: *Mélisande*, *Desdémona*, *Ophélie*, *Viviane*, *Phoebé*, *Salomé*, and *Omphale*. While some of these pieces were published in sets during Bonis’s life, Furore Verlag collected all seven pieces and published them as a collection entitled *Femmes de Légende* in 2003.¹¹ It is unclear whether Bonis conceived of the seven pieces as a collection, but the clear programmatic links to cultural obsessions and unity of programmatic themes between each piece make the set exceptionally cohesive. Bonis’s musical language is unique, and her

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information taken from Christine Géliot, “Biography: Mel Bonis, 1858-1937,” translated by Florence Launay and Michael Cooke, <https://www.mel-bonis.com/EN/Biographie/>.

¹⁰ Jeremy Nicholas, “Mel Bonis: Romance sans paroles, Op. 56,” *International Piano* No. 98, Dec. 2023, 40.

¹¹ Christine Géliot, “Preface,” in *Volume 1: Femmes de Légende: Mélisande, Desdémona, Ophélie, Viviane, Phoebé, Salomé, Omphale* by Mel Bonis, ed. Eberhard Mayer and Christine Géliot (Kassel: Furore Verlag, 2003), 14.

musical commentary on popular literature, artwork, and societal obsessions makes *Femmes de Légende* a fascinating combination of history and artistic fields.

Given the deep programmatic roots of this collection, understanding the artistic culture in which Bonis was writing and the literary, artistic, and cultural inspirations behind each piece is essential in order to fully appreciate the music itself. Through an analysis of societal themes and the meaning and origins of each represented woman as well as of the music itself, I will construct an interpretation of each piece that firmly contextualizes Bonis's music within the Belle Époque period. To accomplish this, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the Belle Époque period and the relevant cultural fads that will pertain to Bonis's women. The following chapters will build upon this information by exploring each woman's literary origins and place in French *fin-de-siècle* culture and how Bonis's music is a musical depiction of these narratives.

The Belle Époque

Bonis composed her *Femmes de Légende* during one of Paris's most exciting eras—the Belle Époque. Around 1940, this term became a standard (albeit nostalgic way) of referring to the beginning of the twentieth century in France, and particularly Paris.¹² This turn-of-the-century time period was characterized by a frenzied search for pleasure, unprecedented flourishing of the arts, and scientific innovation.¹³ Paris was a veritable playground, alive with color, fashion, cafes, shopping, drinking, cabarets, and performances.¹⁴ Scientists such as Louis Pasteur and Marie and Pierre Curie were at their zenith, and France won eighteen Nobel Prizes in the five fields of the award between the Belle Époque years of 1901–1914.¹⁵

¹² Dominique Kalifa, *The Belle Époque: A Cultural History, Paris and Beyond*, trans. Susan Emanuel (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 1, 11.

¹³ Mark S. Micale, "France," in *The Fin -de-Siècle World*, ed. Michael Saler (New York: Routledge, 2015), 104, 114.

¹⁴ Micale, "France," 94-96.

¹⁵ Micale, "France," 104.

One of the most defining elements of this time was the intimate intertwining of the arts; the intersection of visual art, literature, music, theater, and poetry was an obsession for most artists of this time.¹⁶ Musicians and visual artists of the Belle Époque were friends and collaborators, part of an osmotic artistic environment that led to the cross-pollination of all artistic fields.¹⁷ As scholar Dominique Kalifa said of this era, “the Belle Époque was above all *cultural*. It relied heavily on the idea of a prodigious creative flowering that made Paris the incontestable capital of world arts and letters, which in this period witnessed a sort of paroxysm of the audacious, of experimentation and aesthetic inventiveness.”¹⁸

Although the era is typically portrayed as a joyous, peaceful time, there was also a darker current of fear over cultural degeneration that pervaded the era as well.¹⁹ One component of this fear concerned the traditional family model and women’s societal role. Women were increasingly achieving success in various roles outside of the home. One need only look at Marie Curie winning Nobel Prizes in science, Mary Garden running the Lyric Opera in Chicago, Alice Guy Blaché directing movies, and the myriad of women gaining recognition in various artistic fields to realize that women were seizing opportunities to pursue and achieve in their own fields of interest.²⁰ This created consternation among traditionalists and moralists of the era who believed “good” women should primarily be wives and mothers. As a French politician put it, “What is man’s vocation? It is to be a good citizen. And woman’s? To be a good wife and a good mother. One is in some way called to the outside world: the other is retained for the interior.”²¹

Traditionalists viewed women as the “moral guardians of society,” and those who failed to adopt

¹⁶ Paul Roberts, *Images: The Piano Music of Claude Debussy* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁷ Brody, *Paris*, 114-115.

¹⁸ Kalifa, *The Belle Époque*, 4.

¹⁹ Micale, “France,” 110.

²⁰ Paul Fryer, “Introduction: But Where Were the Women?,” in *Women in the Arts in the Belle Époque: Essays on Influential Artists, Writers, and Performers*, ed. Paul Fryer (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012), 2.

²¹ James F. McMillan, *France and Women 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 155.

their role of moral housewife were considered a peril to society.²² As more women opted for higher education and self fulfillment, France's birth rate became static, stoking the fear over cultural degeneration.²³ The *femme fatale* icon became the cultural scapegoat; this "fatal woman" symbolized seduction and destruction, and particularly the ruin of men.²⁴

Cultural Obsessions

Clearly, obsessions and fads defined *fin-de-siecle* Parisian culture, and it is difficult to imagine any artist in the city being ignorant of these cultural interests. Bonis is no exception; the women after which she chose to name her compositions fully reflect the cultural milieu. While many of these literary women were themselves of particular interest to the culture, the themes within the inspiring literature further connect to significant cultural symbols. Specifically, the cultural themes of symbolism, the moon, hair, water/nymphs, the exotic, and sexuality/the *femme fatale* were important obsessions that feature prominently in Bonis's music and the *fin-de-siecle* artistic world. To fully appreciate the programmatic implications of Bonis's music, these cultural obsessions will be examined for the remainder of this chapter and linked with literary and musical threads in chapters three and four.

Symbolism was initiated by the work of Stephane Mallarmé in the 1870s. Initially a literary movement, symbolism sought to avoid realistic descriptions and to instead evoke "impressions, intuitions, sensations."²⁵ Symbolists were fascinated by the idea of a spiritual realm that exists beyond the tangible world; themes of exoticism, eroticism, and individualism were also evoked and explored throughout Symbolist literature.²⁶ Beyond these themes,

²² Tama Lea Engelking, "Renée Vivien and The Ladies of the Lake," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 30, no. 3/4 (2002): 363.

²³ McMillan, *France and Women*, 141.

²⁴ Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (Troy, New York: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 1, 6.

²⁵ Brody, *Paris*, 158.

²⁶ "Symbolist Movement, French," in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, ed. Janet Mullane and Robert Thomas Wilson, Vol. 20 (Detroit: Gale, 1989). *Gale Literature Resource Center*.

symbolism focused on the meaning behind appearances and sought to express the “intangible.”²⁷ The connection between poetry and music was particularly significant to the movement, highlighting again this era’s interest in combining artistic fields.²⁸

Within this symbolic world, the moon held a special fascination for poets, composers, and artists. From Verlaine’s poem entitled “Clair de lune,” to Claude Debussy’s famous piece by the same title (and other pieces involving moonlight), to Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*, the moon appeared symbolically throughout a variety of artistic works. For Symbolists, the moon was mystical, an always changing force reflecting light amidst nighttime shadows.²⁹ As part of its mystical presence, it symbolized eternity and the endless need to change and adapt.³⁰ The moon had many connotations beyond the mystical, however. It also suggested fertility and calendar cycles, deceptiveness, and lunacy.³¹

Hair was a rich symbolic icon for painters and poets in the nineteenth century as well.³² French poets such as Baudelaire and Mallarmé frequently explored hair, and French visual art is replete with women’s luscious locks.³³ In Baudelaire’s poem “La Chevelure” (“Head of Hair”), hair is presented as the vehicle that can usher one into a world of “unreal beauty, sensuality, and passion.”³⁴ Mallarmé associated blonde hair not only with beauty, but also with the idea of radiance and shining.³⁵ Romantic attachment is implied throughout many poems, such as in Pierre Louÿs’s “La chevelure,” in which the narrator speaks of wearing his lover’s hair around

²⁷ Roberts, *Images*, 18.

²⁸ Brody, *Paris*, 161.

²⁹ Catherine Kautsky, *Debussy’s Paris: Piano Portraits of the Belle Époque* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 7.

³⁰ Rosina Neginsky, *Salome: The Image of a Woman Who Never Was; Salome: Nymph, Seducer, Destroyer* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 179.

³¹ Kautsky, *Debussy’s Paris*, 3, 7.

³² Neginsky, *Salome*, 132.

³³ Neginsky, *Salome*, 132-133.

³⁴ Neginsky, *Salome*, 132.

³⁵ Neginsky, *Salome*, 133.

his neck and being united through the intertwining of hair and bodies.³⁶ This current of sexuality was inherent in the French perception of hair.³⁷ However, hair could also portray destruction, as other artistic works portray women strangling men with their hair.³⁸ Particularly in the Belle Époque era, long alluring hair was a distinctly feminine symbol that suggested feminine power—either of seduction, death, or both.³⁹

Water, and water creatures such as nymphs, sirens, and mermaids held a special place in French imagination. French composers of the Belle Époque wrote many pieces with water-related names and themes, which is unsurprising given the symbolism that water possessed during this time. Water was frequently seen as a symbol of power, change, reflections, whimsy, and mystery.⁴⁰ It could also be associated with sexual passion, such as in the case of many of Claude Debussy's water pieces. Beyond the symbolism of water itself, water was the setting for two of the era's fascinations—watery deaths and mythical water creatures. Nineteenth-century authors and visual artists were consumed with the theme of death by water, specifically beautiful virgins who drowned themselves due to unrequited love.⁴¹ On the opposite side of the spectrum is the watery world of the sea women—nymphs, sirens, and mermaids. Water was the playground of these women, and while there are slight differences between each of these sea creatures, they all represented the “seductive and destructive aspects of the feminine.”⁴² Sirens and mermaids had a voracious sexual appetite and constantly sought to lure men to watery deaths through their tantalizing voices, songs, and bodies.⁴³

³⁶ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 147.

³⁷ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 142.

³⁸ Neginsky, *Salome*, 133.

³⁹ Neginsky, *Salome*, 176–177.

⁴⁰ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 125–126.

⁴¹ Alev Lytle Croutier, *Taking the Waters: Spirit, Art, Sensuality* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 188–189.

⁴² Croutier, *Taking the Waters*, 189.

⁴³ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 258–259.

The culture's interest in anything they considered "exotic" connected not only with the fascination with the underwater world, but also represents a broader yet significant cultural theme that pervaded all *fin-de-siecle* artistic fields. Exoticism manifested as an interest in the "Orient,"⁴⁴ a widely-used cultural term that referred very broadly to not only a large geographic region but also a romanticized, fictitious perception of what these cultures deemed as "other."⁴⁵ Victor Hugo's 1829 description of the "Orient" was still accurate at the end of the nineteenth century: "The colors of the Orient are engraved in our thoughts and dreams. Without any effort they become, in turn, Hebrew, Turkish, Greek, Persian, Arabic, even Spanish—for Spain is still the Orient; Spain is half-African and Africa is half-Asiatic."⁴⁶ Edward Said, the scholar who researched and contributed to the definition of the term, emphasizes the cultural connotations beyond a physical location that this term suggested, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. . ."⁴⁷

Romance and eroticism were inherent to the *fin-de-siecle* conception of the "Orient." French novelist Gustave Flaubert associated the "Orient" with fertility and sexuality, and other French authors' depictions of the exotic involved a distinct sensuality.⁴⁸ Within music, there was a small effort to create music based on documentary evidence of Eastern music, but more often, composers drew upon their own and the general cultural perceptions of exotic music to evoke

⁴⁴ As much as possible, the word "exotic" will be used instead of the problematic term "Orient." However, Orientalism was a distinct movement and interest within this time period, with nuances, meanings, and specific details that are not fully conveyed or captured by the term "exoticism." In such cases where these terms cannot be conflated, the term "Orient" or "Orientalism" will be used with quotation marks to indicate the use of these words as a reference to the historical nuances of the words. Such usage should in no way be construed as an endorsement of these terms but rather as an attempt to convey cultural themes in a historically faithful manner.

⁴⁵ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 57.

⁴⁶ Roberts, *Images*, 47.

⁴⁷ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 57.

⁴⁸ Brody, *Paris*, 66.

their impressions of the exotic.⁴⁹ While music with exotic titles became increasingly popular around the *fin-de-siecle* period,⁵⁰ the actual music's engagement with the exotic was mainly confined to rhythmic and melodic elements including ornamentation, augmented seconds, modal and pentatonic scales, and dance rhythms.⁵¹ French visual artists' depictions of exotic landscapes further solidified the culture's perception of the exotic as an unexplored, forgotten world full of "forbidden erotic desires."⁵²

Sexuality is the common thread that unites these themes, and it is a topic that held a significant place in French *fin-de-siecle* culture. Paris was known to be a hotbed of erotic encounters, offering opportunities for all tastes, as well as a thriving commercial sex scene.⁵³ This trend was reflected in the artistic fields of the time; posters featuring scantily clad women selling products were ubiquitous⁵⁴ as was erotic poetry (such as Pierre Louÿs's *Les Chansons de Bilitis* published in 1894⁵⁵) and artwork that explored themes of unrequited love and sexual awakening.⁵⁶ Not all Parisians were thrilled with the craze, however; some people began to grow concerned for the nation's moral welfare and launched leagues that urged social and moral purity.⁵⁷

It was this combination of fear over the consequences of this craze along with the societal fascination with all things erotic that birthed the *femme fatale* icon. As mentioned earlier, the

⁴⁹ Brody, *Paris*, 76.

⁵⁰ Brody, *Paris*, 67.

⁵¹ Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), 140.

⁵² Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 223.

⁵³ Micale, "France," 110.

⁵⁴ Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr, "New Republic, New Women? Feminism and Modernity at the Belle Epoque," in *A 'Belle Epoque'? Women in French Society and Culture 1890-1914*, ed. Diana Holmes and Carrie Tarr (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 17.

⁵⁵ David Grayson, "Bilitis and Tanagra: Afternoons with Nude Women," in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 117.

⁵⁶ Nicole Myers, "Symbolism," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, August 2007, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/symb/hd_symb.htm

⁵⁷ Micale, "France," 111.

femme fatale became a cultural symbol of everything “good women” are not. “Good women” of the time were wives, mothers, homemakers, the safekeepers of morality.⁵⁸ A *femme fatale* was barren, seducing men for her own pleasure, unconcerned for her male victims.⁵⁹ In her book *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon*, Virginia M. Allen summarizes the qualities that are most commonly associated with the *femme fatales* of literature and art: “beautiful,” “erotic,” “seductive,” “destructive,” “exotic,” “self-determined,” and “independent.”⁶⁰ Rosina Neginsky concurs, noting in her book *Salome* that a typical nineteenth-century *femme fatale* was depicted as “beautiful,” “dangerous,” and “dreadful.”⁶¹ This complex female icon achieved a popularity that amounted to a neurotic obsession in France.⁶² While its appeal shares obvious connections with the general sex craze, its cultural significance runs deeper than mere sex. The *femme fatale* icon at its core represented the cultural battle for female sexual autonomy.⁶³ For men, the *femme fatale* was both exciting and alarming; exciting in her contrast to the “good woman,” but alarming in her independence and ability to destroy society.⁶⁴ For women, the *femme fatale* became a model to emulate not just for the sexual intrigue, but more for the freedom and sexual independence that she represented, motives that coalesced with the burgeoning feminist movement.⁶⁵

Ultimately, it is the motif of the *femme fatale* and the sub-motif of sexuality that connects Bonis’s seven pieces and suggests connections between her life and that of the women who inspired her. Bonis was a talented woman who found herself caught in a world and culture that had no professional place for her outside of her role as wife and mother. She obviously struggled with reconciling the morals of her Catholic upbringing with her attraction to Hettich and the

⁵⁸ McMillan, *France and Women*, 155.

⁵⁹ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 4.

⁶⁰ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 4.

⁶¹ Neginsky, *Salome*, 172.

⁶² Neginsky, *Salome*, 74.

⁶³ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 196.

⁶⁴ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 191, 195.

⁶⁵ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 191.

ensuing affair. When one considers the seven women that she selected—women who were icons of seduction, women who implied sexuality through culturally relevant symbols, women who were desperate to escape their societal role, and women who broke cultural gender expectations—striking similarities between Bonis and her women emerge. Was Bonis seeking to reconcile her own desires, choices, and lived experiences vicariously through these pieces? While no definitive scholarly answer can be given, it is certainly plausible that Bonis felt a special connection with these women that extended beyond mere cultural exposure. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the stories and themes of each of these women connect closely with the obsessions of Bonis’s era and the threads of her life.

CHAPTER THREE

MEET THE WOMEN: SEVEN STORIES OF LEGENDARY WOMEN

Each of the women in *Femmes de Légende* has a complex narrative history often involving different eras, cultures, and artistic mediums. These women were not a passing fad in Paris but were rather cultural icons deeply rooted in literary tradition and shaped by the current political, artistic, and societal trends and interests. Thus, in order to fully understand Bonis's artistic thought process and music, it is essential to unpack each woman's story. This chapter offers a synthesis of the important strands of each woman's narrative and weaves relevant cultural themes discussed in chapter two together with each story. The origins of each woman's story will be discussed, along with any significant nineteenth-century adaptations of the story. Visual and literary art forms from this era will also be incorporated, but musical representations will be omitted for two reasons. First, some of the well-known musical representations of these women were composed after Bonis's work (such as Debussy's opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*) and thus could not have influenced Bonis's work. Second, the goal of this project is to showcase how Bonis's music connects with non-musical art forms (such as poetry and visual art). Comparisons to other composers' musical works on the same subject would merely display how that other composer was inspired by non-musical art forms rather than how Bonis musically interpreted these cultural themes and stories.

Mélisande

Mélisande is a shadowy, enigmatic woman full of contrasts who features as one of the main characters in Maurice Maeterlinck's 1892 play *Pelléas and Mélisande*, a work that explores

love and the destruction that can result from love.⁶⁶ The plot is fairly straightforward: Mélisande is discovered crying beside a fountain in a forest by Prince Golaud. A crown is in the water by her. Golaud promptly falls in love with her, and despite Mélisande's refusal to answer any questions about where she is from or why she no longer wants her crown, the two marry. When Mélisande later meets Golaud's half-brother Pelleas, the two fall in love. Golaud becomes suspicious when Mélisande "loses" her wedding ring (she in fact had tossed it into a fountain while spending time with Pelleas). He spies on the lovers, and upon seeing them kiss, kills Pelleas and wounds Mélisande. After delivering a baby, Mélisande also dies.⁶⁷

First produced in 1893, the play is one of Maeterlinck's most famous works and an emblem of the French symbolist movement.⁶⁸ As noted earlier, symbolism imbues everyday objects with special significance—these items become symbols that have deeper meanings.⁶⁹ Through simplicity, repetition, and divergences from typical linguistic syntax, symbolists sought to transcend the concrete world of reality and usher readers into a shadowy, fluid, mystical world.⁷⁰ Maeterlinck's use of suggestion, ambiguity, hidden motives, and silence is in line with this Symbolist world⁷¹ and creates a sense of timelessness and repetition that will be reflected in Bonis's musical interpretation.⁷²

Maeterlinck employs water, moon, and hair as significant symbols to reveal Mélisande's essence and identifies Mélisande with water throughout the play. Her first appearance is at the

⁶⁶ Bettina L. Knapp, *French Fairy Tales: A Jungian Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 283.

⁶⁷ Maurice Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader: Plays, Poems, Short Fiction, Aphorisms, and Essays by Maurice Maeterlinck*, ed. and trans. David Willinger and Daniel Gerould (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2011), 193-241.

⁶⁸ Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and the Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125.

⁶⁹ Jenny Stringer, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Literature in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 653-654.

⁷⁰ Kimberly J. Stern, "Introduction," in *Salome* by Oscar Wilde, ed. Kimberly J. Stern (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2015), 19.

⁷¹ McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck*, 127.

⁷² Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 286.

fountain in the forest where she is crying, she and Pelleas first spend time together at a fountain in a park, she loses her crown and ring in water, and she and Pelleas have their final romantic tryst by the fountain where Pelleas is then murdered. Water has historically been used to signify purity, creativity, and regeneration as well as infinite possibility and nourishment.⁷³ It also connotes the weeping willow, a symbol of unrequited love that links Mélisande to Desdémona and Ophelia.⁷⁴ Mélisande's close association with water suggests that she does possess these qualities of innocence and further conjures images of fluidity, which certainly captures her swift emotional changes.⁷⁵ It also hints at her darker side, as she twice threatens to hurl herself into the water, a subtle reference to Ophelia's watery demise in *Hamlet*.⁷⁶

This affinity for water coupled with her frequent appearances at night suggests a special identification with the moon.⁷⁷ Most of her scenes are set at night, with the final climactic scene featuring her last romantic tryst with Pelleas occurring at night surrounded by moonlight. Pelleas asks her to step out of the moonlight into the shadows, but she argues that she likes the light and wants to be seen.⁷⁸ She is somewhat of a "moon figure," exemplifying both the moon's connotations with purity as well as the dark qualities of the night.⁷⁹

Hair is the symbol that defines Mélisande more than any other feature or quality. It appears not only as a recurring theme in the play, but also as Mélisande's defining feature in artwork. As discussed in chapter two, hair in French culture was an unambiguous symbol of eroticism and sexuality. Thus, it is noteworthy then that Mélisande's hair is first mentioned in her initial meeting with Pelleas by the fountain in the park. As Pelleas exclaims about Mélisande's

⁷³ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 291.

⁷⁴ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 291.

⁷⁵ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 291.

⁷⁶ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 291.

⁷⁷ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 296.

⁷⁸ Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader*, 227-228.

⁷⁹ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 300.

hair falling into the water, she exclaims that her hair is longer than she is.⁸⁰ The full erotic implications of Mélisande's hair is revealed when Pelleas visits Mélisande's tower at night. Upon her hair cascading out of the tower onto Pelleas below, he passionately exclaims, "Your hair, your hair, is cascading down on me! . . . I'm squeezing it in my hands, I'm brushing it against my lips. I'm enfolding it in my arms, I'm draping it around my neck. I'll keep it wrapped in my arms all through the night."⁸¹ Growing increasingly excited, he continues:

When I kiss your hair I'm actually kissing you all over, and engulfed in its flames, I feel no pain. Can you hear my kisses? They climb the length of the thousands of links in the golden chain. Each one of them brings a thousand more; hold fast to them so they and many more will keep kissing you after I'm gone.⁸²

While the sexual implications of this scene are unmistakable, scholar Bettina Knapp notes that Mélisande's hair represents her "most intimate self" and a sense of timelessness, and that Mélisande releasing her hair to Pelleas symbolizes the offer of "an ever-growing life force" to her lover as well as her transformation into a *femme fatale*.⁸³

Two nineteenth-century paintings that prominently feature hair are Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1867) and Fernand Khnopff *I Lock My Door upon Myself* (1891). Rossetti had a fetish for women's hair, a fact immediately apparent when one considers his large number of works that prominently feature women caring for their long, beautiful hair.⁸⁴ Rossetti visited Paris while he was painting this obsession, and between that and his frequent linking of the *femme fatale* icon with hair, it is inconceivable that Parisians of Bonis's time would not have

⁸⁰ Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader*, 202.

⁸¹ Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader*, 213.

⁸² Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader*, 214.

⁸³ Knapp, *French Fairy Tales*, 298-299.

⁸⁴ Virginia M. Allen, "One Strangling Golden Hair: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith*," *The Art Bulletin* 66, no. 2 (June 1984): 288.

thought of *Lady Lilith* when picturing Mélisande, even though the painting is not of Mélisande.⁸⁵ Similarly, Khnopff's portrayal of hair in *I Lock My Door upon Myself* reminded Belle Époque viewers of Mélisande.⁸⁶ In contrast to Rossetti and Khnopff, Marianne Stokes' 1895 depiction of Mélisande focuses on her connection with water. The dark, rich colors of the painting and Mélisande's pensive staring into the waters conveys the mystery and ambiguity that surrounds Mélisande in Maeterlinck's play.

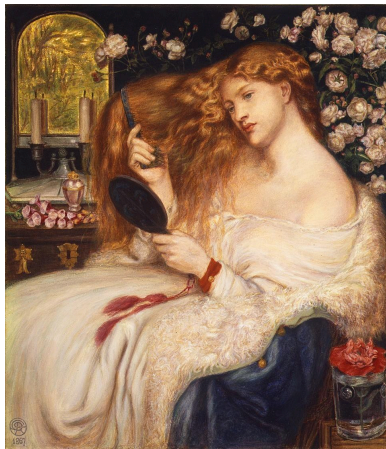


Figure 3.1 Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Treffry Dunn, *Lady Lilith*, 1867⁸⁷



Figure 3.2 Fernand Khnopff, *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1891⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Allen, "One Strangling Golden Hair," 286, 288.

⁸⁶ Leon Botstein, "Beyond the Illusions of Realism: Painting and Debussy's Break with Tradition," in *Debussy and His World*, ed. Jane Fulcher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 172.

⁸⁷ Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Henry Treffry Dunn, *Lady Lilith*, 1867, watercolor and gouache (bodycolor), 20 3/16 x 17 5/16 in. (51.3 x 44 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/337500>.

⁸⁸ Fernand Khnopff, *I Lock My Door upon Myself*, 1891, Oil on canvas, 72.7 x 141 cm, Neue Pinakothek, <https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/en/artwork/ma4dqNqxrO/fernand-khnopff/i-lock-my-door-upon-myself>.



Figure 3.3 Marianne Stokes, *Melisande*, c. 1895⁸⁹

Desdemona and Ophelia

Desdemona is one of the central characters in Shakespeare's play *Othello*, which was published in 1603 and first performed in 1604. Desdemona's complex blend of honesty and intelligence with cultural stereotypes of female purity makes her a rich character with some characteristics that contrast with what Shakespeare's and Bonis's cultures would have considered to be an "ideal woman." In the play, Desdemona falls in love with and marries Othello, a black man and army general. After the two prove to the authorities that they are truly in love and Desdemona has not been seduced by witchcraft to marry a black man, Othello is ordered to Cyprus to deal with an invasion. Desdemona insists on going with him. Once in Cyprus, Iago (Othello's ensign) casts doubt on Desdemona's faithfulness to Othello as revenge for Othello not offering him a promotion. Iago succeeds in poisoning Othello's perception of Desdemona, causing Othello to kill Desdemona for her supposed unfaithfulness. Upon discovering that Iago has deceived him and Desdemona was actually faithful, Othello kills himself.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Marianne Stokes, *Melisande*, c.1895, Oil on canvas, 87 cm × 52 cm (34 in × 20 in), Wallraf-Richartz Museum, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/marianne-stokes/melisande>.

⁹⁰ Michael J. Hartwell, "Othello," in *Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 166 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2016). *Gale Literature Resource Center*.

One theme emerges throughout the play that not only defines Desdemona's role in *Othello* but also connects her with the other women in *Femmes de Légende* and the Belle Époque culture: institutional and cultural gender and sexual expectations for women and the ways that Desdemona both conforms to and defies these expectations. First, Desdemona is consistently depicted as a paragon of virtue and sexual purity through association with images of whiteness significant to the overall plot—her skin, her handkerchief, her wedding sheets.⁹¹ In addition, before meeting Othello, she was meek and mild mannered, a further sign of Desdemona's conformity with gender expectations. As her father put it,

A maiden never bold,
Of spirit so still and quiet that her motion
Blushed at herself—and she in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything,
To fall in love with what she feared to look on!⁹²

However, upon falling in love with Othello, Desdemona departs from some of these cultural norms. The most notable example of this is in her defiance of her father; she marries Othello without telling her father (knowing he will disapprove), and when later questioned by him as to where her loyalty lies, she eloquently argues that she has the right to prioritize her love and relationship with her husband over her father's wishes.⁹³

This disregard for societal expectations continues into her marriage, when she and Othello are ordered to recount their courtship in order for the authorities to determine whether their love is genuine or a product of witchcraft. Desdemona not only speaks in the civil court in support of her marriage, but also frankly says that she wishes to go to Cyprus with Othello in

⁹¹ Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004), 593.

⁹² Garber, *Shakespeare*, 595.

⁹³ Theresa D. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2010), 87.

order to consecrate her marriage.⁹⁴ While speaking in the civil court and articulately arguing for her desires would have already been a bold move, her explicit mention of her sexual desires is a sharp departure from the innocent, naive creature that a woman was supposed to be. In fact, even Othello himself is quick to state that he wishes Desdemona to be with him not because of any sexual passion but because he wants her to be happy.⁹⁵ This switch of cultural gender norms—the male denying sexual desire and the female frankly stating hers—is notable, particularly given Desdemona’s association with purity. She defies all stereotypes by not becoming a dangerous *femme fatale* but also not becoming a docile housewife.

It is ultimately Desdemona’s ability to chart her own path that leads to her murder. Her father’s warning to Othello at the beginning of their marriage introduced the first seed of doubt about Desdemona in Othello’s mind:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see.

She has deceived her father, and may thee.⁹⁶

Iago then capitalized on this doubt by pointing out Desdemona’s interactions with Cassio, Othello’s lieutenant. Desdemona’s innocent advocacy for Cassio was spun to be a sign of her romantic interest in him.⁹⁷ Iago’s placement of Desdemona’s handkerchief in Cassio’s possession is the final piece of “proof” that convinces Othello of Desdemona’s supposed unfaithfulness.⁹⁸ Notice that it was Desdemona’s ability to choose her own partner and effectively advocate for that choice that ultimately became the basis for male suspicion. She was articulate and passionate, talents that led to her involvement in the male political realm.⁹⁹ Although she was

⁹⁴ Garber, *Shakespeare*, 598.

⁹⁵ Garber, *Shakespeare*, 599.

⁹⁶ Tina Packer, *Women of Will: Following the Feminine in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 194.

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, annotated by Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 102-103.

⁹⁸ Packer, *Women of Will*, 196.

⁹⁹ Garber, *Shakespeare*, 613.

morally blameless, her strength and lack of conformity to social conventions excited Othello's insecurities, making him susceptible to a jealousy and fear so strong that he murdered Desdemona in their bed on the white bedsheets that still testified to her innocence.¹⁰⁰

Ultimately, Desdemona was unable to overcome the institutional structures that she lived within.¹⁰¹ Her marriage overcame many societal prejudices, but it was her husband's belief in societal conventions (his trust of his officer over his wife, his belief in capital punishment for infidelity, his concern for his political position and public presentation) that ultimately doomed Desdemona.¹⁰² One has to wonder if Bonis personally related to these aspects of Desdemona's story. Despite her talent, Bonis was unable to overcome societal and institutional prejudices against her gender, and her husband was unsupportive of her musical interests. Perhaps to Bonis, this was its own kind of death.

Paintings by Théodore Chassériau and Eugène Delacroix demonstrate key elements of Desdemona's story. Chassériau's *Othello and Desdemona in Venice* (1850) captures the two lovers before their relationship crumbled. Notice the contrasts in the painting; Othello is painted with dark colors and sits in a shadow, whereas Desdemona is clothed in white and sits in the sun. Ironically, Othello leans towards Desdemona and seems enraptured by her. One would never guess that he would quickly become her murderer. This heartwarming scene contrasts sharply with Chassériau's *Desdemona (The Song of the Willow)* (1849). This painting portrays Desdemona in her bedroom just hours before her murder. Desdemona knows that Othello no longer seems to love her, and the title references her song of longing and unrequited love. The dim lighting of the room and the spotlight on Desdemona creates the impression of time stopping; this is Desdemona's moment, one that will become the focal point of Bonis's musical

¹⁰⁰ Garber, *Shakespeare*, 614.

¹⁰¹ Packer, *Women of Will*, 198.

¹⁰² Packer, *Women of Will*, 198.

setting. The dark colors and hazy figures in *Death of Desdemona* (1858) by Eugène Delacroix illustrate the tragedy of Desdemona's violent end. Even in death, Desdemona is spotlighted by the lighting and her white clothes; the surrounding darkness and lack of clarity demonstrate the injustice that surrounds her.



Figure 3.4 Théodore Chassériau, *Othello and Desdemona in Venice*, 1850¹⁰³



Figure 3.5 Théodore Chassériau, *Desdemona (The Song of the Willow)*, 1849¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Théodore Chassériau, *Othello and Desdemona in Venice*, 1850, oil on panel, 25 x 20 cm, Musée du Louvre, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18107752>.

¹⁰⁴ Théodore Chassériau, *Desdemona (The Song of the Willow)*, 1849, oil on wood, 13 3/4 x 10 5/8 in. (34.9 x 27 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.27270064>.



Figure 3.6 Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Desdemona*, 1858¹⁰⁵

Ophelia was a woman caught in a web of deception; used by those she loved most and trapped within familial and political systems, she resorted to lunacy and ultimately death in order to escape.¹⁰⁶ *Hamlet*, published in 1603, tells the story of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark. Hamlet's deceased father appears to him in the form of a ghost and urges him to avenge his murder at the hands of his brother Claudius, now King of Denmark. This revelation of his father's murder at the hands of his uncle sends Hamlet into emotional turmoil; he decides to feign lunacy so that Claudius would not suspect his secret is known. Hamlet's sudden insanity immediately arouses suspicion, and Polonius, lord of the treasury, thinks that this sudden strange behavior is due to his daughter Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet (a rejection that he urged). After Hamlet mistakenly kills Polonius, Ophelia goes crazy and drowns herself. Hamlet kills Claudius and dies shortly thereafter.¹⁰⁷

Despite Ophelia being a relatively minor character in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare still conjures a poignant picture of a "good girl"—obedient, innocent, and pure—and of the madness that

¹⁰⁵ Eugene Delacroix, *Death of Desdemona*, 1858, oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13613153>.

¹⁰⁶ Packer, *Women of Will*, 190.

¹⁰⁷ Joyce Moss and George Wilson, "Overview: *Hamlet*," in *Ancient Times to the American and French Revolutions (Prehistory–1790s)*, Vol. 1 of *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1997). *Gale Literature Resource Center*.

results when such a girl is confronted with tragedy and denied the truth.¹⁰⁸ We see both Ophelia's innocence and the ways that she is smothered by her family in the scene where her brother warns her of Hamlet, whom she loves. Although the brother does paint Hamlet as a philanderer, he is more focused on warning Ophelia of her own changing body and of the desires that could cause her to become "prodigal."¹⁰⁹ Ophelia's dad echoes this warning and then commands her to break off all contact with Hamlet, further heightening Ophelia's turmoil over her feelings for Hamlet.¹¹⁰ When Hamlet then breaks into her room pretending to be mad and denounces any feelings he ever had for her, Ophelia believes that it must be her refusal of Hamlet that has caused his lunacy—she is to blame for the destruction of his mind.¹¹¹ Her conclusion reflects the effects of the male paranoia around female sexuality and desire with which she has been surrounded.¹¹²

When her father dies and Hamlet is to be sent off to England, Ophelia finally succumbs to real madness, ironically a condition at least partially brought about by Hamlet's pretended madness. Hamlet used her as a tool to prove his supposed lunacy, and Ophelia's father and brother used Ophelia to spy on Hamlet.¹¹³ Ophelia buckles under the weight of the loss of her father, her beloved's love, and her lack of agency in discovering the truth of the situation. In her madness, she wanders around the court singing nonsensical songs that were "disturbingly erotic," a complete contrast to the previously chaste Ophelia.¹¹⁴ Ophelia finally wanders outside to sit in a willow tree; the branch breaks, she falls into the river, sings a few songs while she floats, and eventually sinks to the bottom of the river.¹¹⁵ Elizabethan audiences would have viewed

¹⁰⁸ Linda Welshimer Wagner, "Ophelia: Shakespeare's Pathetic Plot Device," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1963): 94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2868164>.

¹⁰⁹ Carroll Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1964): 248. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867895>.

¹¹⁰ Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," 248.

¹¹¹ Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," 248.

¹¹² Garber, *Shakespeare*, 484.

¹¹³ Packer, *Women of Will*, 191–192.

¹¹⁴ Garber, *Shakespeare*, 494.

¹¹⁵ Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," 252.

Ophelia's death as a result of her unrequited love, and it is reasonable to conjecture that Belle Époque audiences with their obsession with love and sexuality would also have viewed her death similarly.¹¹⁶

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia blossoms as a character in her madness and death; this fascinated artists of the late nineteenth century. Ophelia's desperation for love and self-destruction as a result of rejection was one of *fin-de-siecle* France's most popular subjects.¹¹⁷ She fit perfectly with the cultural ideals of femininity; a pure, loving woman, devoted to her man to the point of death, with her madness adding pathos and intrigue.¹¹⁸ The three paintings included here became cultural icons of Ophelia. John Everett Millais' *Ophelia* (1852) is perhaps the most famous depiction of Ophelia and emphasizes Ophelia's death and ultimate unity with the water.¹¹⁹ Eugène Delacroix's *The Death of Ophelia* (1853) offers a different interpretation from Millais's wan heroine. Delacroix's Ophelia is disheveled in her madness, and her firm grasp of the willow tree indicates that her drowning will be a choice, not an accident.¹²⁰ Finally, Alexandre Cabanel's *Ophelia* (1883) combines elements of the previous two paintings. His Ophelia is a striking juxtaposition of the idea of a proper woman (as signified by her beauty and refined clothes) with the startling reality of this proper woman's madness and self-imposed watery death.

¹¹⁶ Camden, "On Ophelia's Madness," 254.

¹¹⁷ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 42.

¹¹⁸ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 42.

¹¹⁹ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 43.

¹²⁰ James M. Vest, *The French Face of Ophelia from Belleforest to Baudelaire* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 153-154.



Figure 3.7 Alexandre Cabanel, *Ophelia*, 1883¹²¹



Figure 3.8 John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852¹²²



Figure 3.9 Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Ophelia*, 1853¹²³

¹²¹ Alexandre Cabanel, *Ophelia*, 1883, oil on canvas, 77 x 117.5 cm, Private Collection, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/alexandre-cabanel/ophelia>

¹²² John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852, oil on canvas, 30 x 44 in., Tate Britain, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506>

¹²³ Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Ophelia*, 1853, oil on canvas, 23 x 30 cm., Musée du Louvre, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.15681452>.

Viviane

As a character in the King Arthur legend, Viviane appears at first glance to be the outlier of Bonis's *Femmes de Légende*. What is a somewhat obscure woman from a thoroughly English legend doing in a French composer's collection of pieces? The answer spans centuries, countries, and cultural eras. The King Arthur story starts (oddly enough) in medieval France. From the 1100s to the end of the Middle Ages, King Arthur was one of the most popular literary figures in France, with over 100 literary romances being written about Arthur and his friends' exploits.¹²⁴ These manuscripts were translated into virtually every language and have inspired additions, revisions, and countless reimaginings of King Arthur and his court from the Middle Ages to the present.¹²⁵ Arthurian fever infected England around 1485 due to the release of Sir Thomas Malory's book *Le Morte d'Arthur*; but even this pillar of English scholarship and legend drew primarily from the already rich tradition of French sources.¹²⁶

The plethora of versions of the Arthur tale along with the nature of the tale's origins presents a particular challenge in piecing together the story of Viviane. Medieval authors treated Arthur as a continuous literary tradition, paying more attention to adding to the story and revising each other's work than in contributing distinct, stand-alone novels.¹²⁷ As a result, details concerning characters and plot can vary greatly between each of the hundreds of versions of the legend, a fact that is readily apparent with Viviane. Throughout Arthurian literature, a "Lady of the Lake" is alternatively named Viviane, Vivien, Niniane, Nimue, Nineve, and Nymue.¹²⁸ While

¹²⁴ Norris J. Lacy, "French Arthurian Literature," in *Literature of the French and Occitan Middle Ages: Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. Deborah M. Sinnreich-Levi and Ian S. Laurie, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 208 (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1999). *Gale Literature Resource Center*.

¹²⁵ Lacy, "French Arthurian Literature."

¹²⁶ Karen Sullivan, *The Danger of Romance: Truth, Fantasy, and Arthurian Fictions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2018), 7.

¹²⁷ Sullivan, *The Danger of Romance*, 19.

¹²⁸ Maureen Fries, "From The Lady to The Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance," *Arthuriana* 4, no. 1 (1994): 9.

there is some disagreement among scholars as to how many distinct Lady of the Lake characters exist, most agree that all of these names refer to the same character due to the obvious similarities in this character's placement within the plot and consistent association with the characters Merlin and Lancelot. Despite these name discrepancies, general characteristics and consistencies between the different versions of Viviane can be outlined in order to construct an idea of her role in literature.

Viviane's most famous position in Arthurian literature is in her interaction with Merlin, a prophet/supernatural creature.¹²⁹ The majority of Arthurian sources narrate that Viviane decided to learn magic from Merlin and then used this knowledge of magic to cast a spell on Merlin that prevented him from ever leaving the place in which she had trapped him.¹³⁰ Sources differ in assigning motive to Viviane and in the nature of Merlin and Viviane's relationship. Some versions cast Viviane as a fairy, and suggest that although Merlin was completely devoted to her, she was not content and wove an enchantment that permanently contained him within a tower so that she would never have to worry about him abandoning her.¹³¹

In this version, she entices Merlin to teach her the spell by promising to be with him forever and by showing him "greater semblance of love than she had ever before made" after he taught her.¹³² While she is certainly painted as enticing and full of feminine wile, she is not portrayed as an evil vixen, and is even somewhat favorably cast since she keeps her promise to visit Merlin often.¹³³ In other versions, Viviane is portrayed as deliberately deceptive. Merlin in these cases is often painted as lecherous; Viviane realizes this and manipulates his desire for her

¹²⁹ Carolyne Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 98.

¹³⁰ Larrington, *King Arthur's Enchantresses*, 98.

¹³¹ Thomas Bulfinch, *The Age of Chivalry: Or Legends of King Arthur* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2012), 33.

¹³² Bulfinch, *The Age of Chivalry*, 33.

¹³³ Bulfinch, *The Age of Chivalry*, 34.

to get him to teach her the magic that she uses to permanently trap him.¹³⁴ Accounts are split as to whether Viviane used her body to get what she wanted¹³⁵ or whether she merely manipulated through words and promises.¹³⁶

However Viviane obtained her magical powers, she used them to become the “Lady of the Lake.” Frequently referred to in this capacity as a nymph, she used spells to hide her castle beneath a mirage of water.¹³⁷ When Lancelot’s mother left him as a baby by the side of this lake, Viviane snatched him and dragged him deep into the lake, raising him in her watery kingdom.¹³⁸ Nymphs and watery kingdoms immediately suggest a connection with Ondine, a mermaid/nymph who used her beauty, irresistible singing, and sexuality to lure men to their death.¹³⁹ Half fairy and half human, enchanting, dangerous, and powerful: Viviane possessed all the qualities necessary to titillate the imaginations of Belle Époque artists.¹⁴⁰

Nineteenth-century artists did indeed find Viviane provocative, and this era decidedly shifted Viviane’s story. No longer the morally ambiguous fairy figure of the Medieval tales, she became a true vixen under the pen of famous poet Alfred Tennyson and the lesser known poet Renée Vivien. Tennyson’s contribution to the Arthur legend, *Idylls of the King*, was translated into French and published in 1868.¹⁴¹ Tennyson calls Viviane “wily” and details all the ways in which she flirted with Merlin, employing petulance, playfulness, singing, and feminine wiles to make him fall in love with her.¹⁴² She is compared to a snake and a harlot in the way that she

¹³⁴ Anne Berthelot, “Merlin and the Ladies of the Lake,” in *Merlin: A Casebook*, ed. Peter H. Goodrich and Raymond H. Thompson (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 170.

¹³⁵ Bulfinch, *The Age of Chivalry*, 33.

¹³⁶ Berthelot, “Merlin and the Ladies,” 164.

¹³⁷ Berthelot, “Merlin and the Ladies,” 168.

¹³⁸ Bulfinch, *The Age of Chivalry*, 74.

¹³⁹ Paul Roberts, *Reflections: The Piano Music of Maurice Ravel* (Milwaukee: Amadeus Press, 2012), 182.

¹⁴⁰ Kautsky, *Debussy’s Paris*, 116.

¹⁴¹ Marjorie Bowden, *Tennyson in France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1930), 60.

¹⁴² Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*, ed. J.M. Gray (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 142.

seduces Merlin, and her manipulative nature is on clear display as she wheedles the charm out of Merlin and encloses him forever in a hollow oak tree.¹⁴³

Tennyson's interpretation of Viviane likely inspired Renée Vivien's poem "Viviane." Despite being born in England, Vivien moved to Paris around 1900 and wrote French poetry.¹⁴⁴ Her 1903 poem "Viviane" depicts an erotic, evil temptress to whom Merlin inevitably succumbs.¹⁴⁵ Viviane herself in this poem perhaps best summarizes her actions:

Yes, I betrayed him...But is it not the destiny of humans eternally to betray those they love? Whether the treason is mediocre or immense, it slips irremediably through the lips that possess. Yes, I betrayed Merwynn. I dispossessed him of wisdom, but I have given him what is infinitely more precious: the annihilation of thought.¹⁴⁶

Visual art followed the literary cultural trends and focused on Viviane's role as a seductress. Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones displayed his painting *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874–1877) at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris, which sparked his reputation in France.¹⁴⁷ Virginia Allen notes that the curves of Viviane's body and the trees in the background initially convey the impression of motion, but the tight composition, surrounding leaves, and intensity of the stare between Merlin and Viviane ultimately leave the viewer feeling trapped and breathless, just as Viviane enclosed Merlin.¹⁴⁸ Gustave Doré illustrated the French translation of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and his illustrations were popular in France. One French critic wrote, "The engravings are just what is needed; they hold the attention, and suggest the poet's thought without revealing too much, so that one would wish to read the work, even were it not

¹⁴³ Tennyson, *Idylls*, 164–165, 167.

¹⁴⁴ "Renée Vivien," in *Gale Literature: Contemporary Authors* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2003). *Gale Literature Resource Center*.

¹⁴⁵ Engelking, "Renée Vivien," 367.

¹⁴⁶ Renée Vivien, "Viviane," in *Lilith's Legacy: Prose Poems and Short Stories*. Trans. Brian Stableford. (Snuggly Books, 2018), 72–73.

¹⁴⁷ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 167.

¹⁴⁸ Allen, *The Femme Fatale*, 168.

signed Alfred Tennyson.”¹⁴⁹ *Vivien and Merlin Repose* (1868) depicts Vivien in the act of bewitching Merlin. The tree that ominously dominates the engraving will become the tree in which Vivien eternally traps Merlin.



Figure 3.10 Sir Edward Coley Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874–1877¹⁵⁰

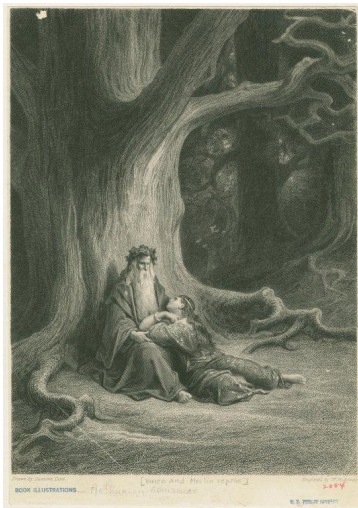


Figure 3.11 Gustave Doré “Vivien and Merlin repose,” 1868¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Bowden, *Tennyson in France*, 63.

¹⁵⁰ Burne-Jones, Edward Coley, Sir, 1833-1898. *The Beguiling of Merlin*, 1874–1877. Oil on canvas, 186x111cm. <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-beguiling-of-merlin-102461>

¹⁵¹ The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. ""Vivien and Merlin repose."" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed January 22, 2024. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6c540795-9cb4-4f50-e040-e00a180664c5>

Ultimately, Viviane is profoundly tied to *fin-de-siecle* France. There is the obvious water nymph connection, but more than that, she reflects the shifting power dynamics and cultural unrest surrounding gender roles of this time. Viviane, with her affinity for obtaining power through flirtation and manipulation, was a decided terror to traditional nineteenth-century values.¹⁵²

Phoebe and Omphale

Symbolists frequently drew from Greek mythology in their work, so it is no surprise that Bonis included two mythological Greek goddesses in her collection.¹⁵³ Although the stories of Phoebe and Omphale are not as narratively cohesive as the other women in *Femmes de Légende*, common threads do emerge that connect with the cultural milieu of France. Both Phoebe and Omphale's legends have sexual overtones, which makes sense given that the destructiveness of sexual desire was a common theme in Greek mythology.¹⁵⁴ This provides a link between sex-crazed Paris and Greek mythology. In addition, Phoebe's connection to the moon and Omphale's upheaval of traditional gender roles parallels themes Parisians were exploring through various artistic avenues.

Phoebe's inclusion in *Femmes de Légende* is interesting, as Phoebe does not seem to have occupied an auspicious place in Greek mythology. Hesiod's *Theogony*, which dates back to the eighth and ninth centuries B.C., constitutes (along with the writings of Homer) the most important and commonly referred to versions of Greek mythology.¹⁵⁵ *Theogony* details the ancient Greek version of the creation of the world and the birth of the gods as well as the various stories that accompanied each god.¹⁵⁶ Phoebe is only mentioned twice in *Theogony*, and both are brief mentions concerning genealogy. The first mention is of her birth, a result of the union of

¹⁵² Engelking, "Renée Vivien," 363.

¹⁵³ Myers, "Symbolism," https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/symb/hd_symb.htm.

¹⁵⁴ Hesiod, *The Poems of Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, and The Shield of Herakles*, trans. Barry P. Powell (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 24.

¹⁵⁵ Hesiod, *The Poems of Hesiod*, 1, 6.

¹⁵⁶ Hesiod, *The Poems of Hesiod*, 21.

Earth and Sky.¹⁵⁷ The second is of the children she birthed.¹⁵⁸ Other sources provide slightly more context on Phoebe's place in Greek mythology. Scholar Robert Graves notes that Phoebe was a Titaness over the Moon, with enchantment being the Moon's particular power¹⁵⁹ (the Titans and Titanesses were primordial gods, existing in a time when the world was still being formed).¹⁶⁰ Phoebe's association with the moon is reflected in her name, which can be translated to "The Shining One."¹⁶¹

Perhaps Bonis's choice of Phoebe reflects the cultural obsession with the moon. Poets such as Verlaine, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Giraud wrote poetry about the moon, and Debussy and Schoenberg composed famous pieces inspired by the moon. Belle Époque scholar Catherine Kautsky notes that the moon was viewed and portrayed as a "mystical presence," giving mysterious, indirect light, corresponding to the calendar and fertility cycles, and influencing the behavior of creatures on earth.¹⁶² Kautsky further argues that the moon is also tied to the idea of lunacy (lunacy derives from the Latin word for moon, "luna")¹⁶³ and that the French of the Belle Époque era viewed lunacy as a liberation from societal customs and morality, an enticing prospect for many of this culture.¹⁶⁴ While it is impossible to know for certain, it seems likely that Bonis's choice of Phoebe was more of a reference to the cultural connotations of the moon rather than a serious link to Greek mythology. This is supported by Christine Géliot's (Bonis's great-granddaughter) notes in the preface to the Furore Verlag score, in which she writes that the moon symbolizes the idea of night and chastity.¹⁶⁵ Given Bonis's biography and conflicted

¹⁵⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony: Works and Days*, trans. by C.S. Morrissey (New York: Talonbooks, 2012), 11.

¹⁵⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 27.

¹⁵⁹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, ed. Michel W. Pharand (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 2001), 27, 29.

¹⁶⁰ Richard Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 47.

¹⁶¹ Pierre Grimal, *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. Stephen Kershaw (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 351.

¹⁶² Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 7.

¹⁶³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, "lune (n.2), Etymology," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1471260173>.

¹⁶⁴ Kautsky, *Debussy's Paris*, 7.

¹⁶⁵ Géliot, "Preface," 15.

experiences with love, perhaps Bonis saw in Phoebe a kindred connection to the two contrasting sides of the moon: the symbol of purity that her religious background encouraged, and the darker side of the moon that symbolized a release from the constraints of society and reason.

Unlike Phoebe, Omphale has a more established place in Greek tradition, although sources differ on the details of her life. Omphale reigned as Queen of Lydia and bought the god Heracles¹⁶⁶ to be her slave. Some versions of her story say that she bought Heracles to rid her kingdom of criminals and monsters and that Heracles served her as a fighter.¹⁶⁷ Other versions of the story maintain that Omphale treated Heracles as a house servant, making him do “women's work” such as weaving and spinning and dressing him in female clothes.¹⁶⁸ Eventually however, Omphale and Heracles seem to have become lovers; most versions of the story maintain the two had children together,¹⁶⁹ with some versions mentioning that they married once Omphale freed him.¹⁷⁰ One of the characteristic stories of Omphale and Hercules concerns their encounter with the god Pan. Omphale and Hercules were visiting a vineyard and Pan saw them, falling instantly in love with Omphale. Unbeknownst to Pan, Omphale and Hercules decided to exchange clothes. When the two were asleep, Pan snuck into their room, fumbling in the dark for Omphale. Feeling a silk gown and assuming it was Omphale, Pan snuck into the bed, only to be kicked across the room by Hercules who was wearing Omphale's robe.¹⁷¹

As one might expect of Greek mythology, there are several themes woven into Omphale's story that are not immediately apparent upon a quick perusal of her story. First, there is a subtle connection with the idea of the exotic. Omphale was Queen of Lydia, which was located on the

¹⁶⁶ The names “Heracles” and “Hercules” are used interchangeably but denote the same person.

¹⁶⁷ Grimal, *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 311.

¹⁶⁸ Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942), 237.

¹⁶⁹ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 527.

¹⁷⁰ Grimal, *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 311.

¹⁷¹ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 527-528.

west coast of Asia Minor.¹⁷² Scholar Elmer Suhr points out that those who lived on the Greek mainland would have viewed Omphale as an “Oriental” woman.¹⁷³ Second, themes of sexuality and gender roles are woven throughout every version of the story. Omphale means “navel,” and the navel was considered by the Greeks to be the root of female passion.¹⁷⁴ This perhaps contributed to why some Classical writers interpreted Hercules's slavery to Omphale as a warning tale of how easy it is for men to be enslaved by “lecherous” women.¹⁷⁵

While there unfortunately does not appear to be any artwork dedicated to Phoebe, Omphale occupies a time-honored place in art history. Since the sixteenth century, artists have created paintings and sculptures of Omphale and Hercules that emphasize these themes of sexuality and gender roles. Peter Paul Rubens' *Hercules and Omphale* (1602–1605) is one of the more famous examples of Omphale in visual art and summarizes many facets of Omphale's story. In the painting, Omphale is clad in Hercules's distinctive lion skin, holds his staff, and is positioned standing above him, while he is seated below her and forced to weave, a symbol of his humiliation and becoming like a woman.¹⁷⁶ Omphale's navel is exposed and highlighted by the light, a likely reference to her name.¹⁷⁷ French artists François Lemoyne and François Boucher also tapped into these themes with their paintings entitled *Hercules and Omphale*. Lemoyne's work (1724) in particular is quite similar to Rubens's painting. Omphale is positioned over Hercules and wears his lion's skin, while Hercules receives her attention and holds weaving equipment. Boucher (c. 1730) paints the two as equals and lovers, omitting the typical features which indicate Omphale's domination. In all three of these works, Omphale's counter-cultural

¹⁷² Robin Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Routledge, 2004), 274.

¹⁷³ Elmer G. Suhr, “Herakles and Omphale,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 57, no. 4 (1953): 252. <https://doi.org/10.2307/501141>.

¹⁷⁴ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 529.

¹⁷⁵ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 529.

¹⁷⁶ Frances Huemer, “A Dionysiac Connection in an Early Rubens,” *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (1979): 562. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3049937>.

¹⁷⁷ Huemer, “A Dionysiac Connection,” 562.

independence and assumption of a male's role is clear. While there is no way of knowing for certain why Bonis chose Omphale, one wonders if her inclusion of this queen was subtle commentary on the era's concern about women becoming too powerful and destroying men.



Figure 3.12 Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1602–1605¹⁷⁸



Figure 3.13 François Lemoyne, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1724¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Peter Paul Rubens, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1602–1605, oil on canvas, 278 x 216 cm, Musée du Louvre, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18137406>.

¹⁷⁹ François Lemoyne, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1724, oil on canvas, 184 x 149 cm. Musée du Louvre, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010059541>



Figure 3.14 François Boucher, *Hercules and Omphale*, c. 1730¹⁸⁰

Salome

Salome's story begins in the gospels of Matthew and Mark. John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod the tetrarch. Herod's wife (and sister-in-law), Herodias, was desperate to kill John because of his outspoken disapproval of her marriage to Herod, her brother-in-law. Herodias's daughter, Salome, danced for Herod on his birthday, and Herod being pleased with the dance, offered Salome anything she might want. After consulting with Herodias, Salome asked for and received the head of John the Baptist on a platter.¹⁸¹

Despite appearing only briefly as a supporting character in the Bible, Salome has inexplicably become the ultimate symbol of the *femme fatale* and an emblem of female sexuality and seductive power. Her portrayal over the centuries has morphed from that of a dutiful daughter in John the Baptist's story to that of a dangerous, independent woman.¹⁸² The earliest versions of Salome's story, which can be traced back to the early Church fathers and Middle Ages, emphasize her being evil, while the Baroque and Renaissance eras highlighted her beauty

¹⁸⁰ François Boucher, *Hercules and Omphale*, c. 1730, oil on canvas, 90 x 74 cm, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14497939>.

¹⁸¹ Matt. 14:1–11 (New King James Version).

¹⁸² Neginsky, *Salome*, 2.

alongside her evil.¹⁸³ The beginning of the feminist movement in the nineteenth century revolutionized cultural perceptions of Salome. Salome began to be depicted as a dangerously independent woman who uses her sexuality and beauty to cause irrepressible sexual desire, thus manipulating and ultimately destroying men and reflecting societal fears.¹⁸⁴

These themes of deviant sexuality, beauty, and desire captivated nineteenth-century France's imagination; more visual and literary images of Salome were produced in France than any other country during this time period.¹⁸⁵ The Belle Époque spirit of artistic collaboration and inspiration led to Salome's formation as a complex woman. Painters such as Henri Regnault and Gustave Moreau's depictions of Salome inspired and shaped writers' representations of Salome, with these writers drawing inspiration from their predecessors and peers and adding yet another layer to the Salome legend. While Oscar Wilde's Salome has perhaps become the most well known literary version of Salome, Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, and Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote their own accounts/descriptions of Salome that predate Wilde's play. These authors shaped France's general cultural knowledge and perception of Salome, thus likely influencing Bonis's musical interpretation of Salome.

Heinrich Heine's narrative poem *Atta Troll* published in a French translation in 1847 seems to have been largely responsible for instigating the French craze over Salome.¹⁸⁶ The poem narrates a hunt for a symbolic bear entitled "Atta Troll." On the night before St. John's Day, the narrator observes a procession of ghosts, all famous sinners.¹⁸⁷ Salome, named "Herodias" in the poem, (Heine and other German medieval authors often conflated Salome and Herodias) is part of this ghostly procession.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Neginsky, *Salome*, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Neginsky, *Salome*, 2.

¹⁸⁵ Neginsky, *Salome*, 71.

¹⁸⁶ Neginsky, *Salome*, 105–106.

¹⁸⁷ Neginsky, *Salome*, 106.

¹⁸⁸ Neginsky, *Salome*, 106.

Heine's depiction of Salome introduces three elements that eventually define Salome in later versions. First, her appearance is described in sultry detail. For example:

Soft her lips, like pomegranates;
Little nose an arching lily;
Supple limbs as cool and slender
As a palm in an oasis.¹⁸⁹

This model of descriptive, allegorical language features prominently in other versions of Salome and highlights the obsession with her beauty. Second, the poem describes how Herodias is holding the head of John the Baptist and kissing it "with ardor" while also treating it as a toy:¹⁹⁰

Sometimes she will toss the head up
In the air with childish laughter,
And then catch it very nimbly
As if playing ball with it.¹⁹¹

The poem further refers to Salome's feelings for John the Baptist as "bloody passion" and relates that she died of "loving-madness."¹⁹² This imagery introduces one of the more disturbing aspects of the Salome legend—woven throughout is an undeniable theme of necrophilia and of intense sexual desire that even death does not quench. Finally, Heine delves into the idea of Salome as a seductress. The narrator of the poem relates the following feelings upon seeing Salome:

When she rode by me, she looked up,
Gazed at me, and then she nodded,
All with such coquettish languor

¹⁸⁹ Heinrich Heine, *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version*, trans. Hal Draper (Boston: Suhrkamp/Insel, 1982), 458.

¹⁹⁰ Heine, *The Complete Poems*, 458.

¹⁹¹ Heine, *The Complete Poems*, 459.

¹⁹² Heine, *The Complete Poems*, 459.

That my inmost heartstrings quivered.¹⁹³

The narrator goes on to describe how he tossed and turned throughout the night as he remembered this haunting encounter. Even as a ghost, Salome has the power to affect men, to make them quiver with desire, to invade their minds. Despite Salome's short appearance in *Atta Troll*, Heine's emphasis on Salome's body and beauty, extreme sexual desire, and her ability to seduce paints a picture of a mysterious, infinitely desirable woman who ultimately leaves death in her wake.

Visual artists Henri Regnault and Gustave Moreau's paintings on Salome expand on the themes Heine introduced and became highly influential in the work of authors Flaubert, Huysmans, and Wilde. Regnault's painting *Salome* debuted at the Salon of 1870 and ushered in the era of Salome's independence. A young woman is depicted in the center of the frame holding a plate with a sword lying on top. John the Baptist's head is not depicted, only implied because of the presence of the platter and sword. This is a striking change to previous art; Salome is no longer seen as a villain in John the Baptist's story; she is now the main character of her own story and is the sole object of the viewer's attention.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Heine, *The Complete Poems*, 459.

¹⁹⁴ Neginsky, *Salome*, 107, 110.



Figure 3.15 Henri Regnault, *Salome*, 1870¹⁹⁵

While Regnault introduced the idea of Salome as an independent *femme fatale*, Moreau created art that directly influenced Huysmans' and Wilde's vivid characterizations of Salome. Salome held a particular fascination for Moreau; he created around one hundred paintings on the Salome theme and was inspired by both Regnault's painting and Heine's poem.¹⁹⁶ Moreau's two most famous paintings on Salome, *Salome Dancing before Herod* and *The Apparition* were both displayed at the Salon of 1876.¹⁹⁷ These two paintings, as well as many of Moreau's other paintings on the topic depict Salome dancing, an activity that French authors often dwelt on in their own interpretations of the seductress.¹⁹⁸ Salome's dance was closely tied to seduction; it was the movement of her body as well as her beauty that caused men to fall prey to her destructive whims and desires.

¹⁹⁵ Henri Regnault, *Salome*, 1870, oil on canvas, 63 x 40 1/2 in. (160 x 102.9 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437384>

¹⁹⁶ Neginsky, *Salome*, 139, 107.

¹⁹⁷ Neginsky, *Salome*, 107.

¹⁹⁸ Neginsky, *Salome*, 116.



Figure 3.16 Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing before Herod*, 1874–1876¹⁹⁹

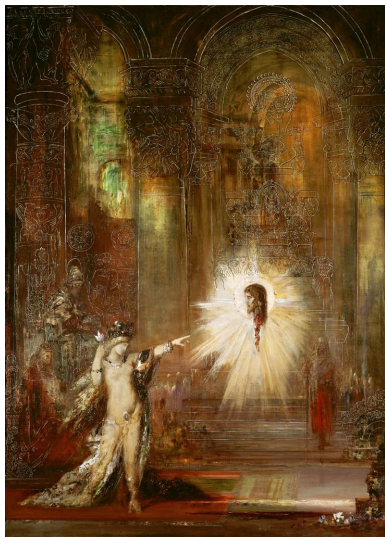


Figure 3.17 Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876²⁰⁰

Writer Gustave Flaubert saw Moreau's paintings at the Salon in 1876 and in 1877 published his own story, "Herodias," which focused upon the effects of Salome's dance.²⁰¹

Flaubert's depiction of the dance draws from his predecessors in his use of poetic, allegorical language to describe the sensuousness of Salome's body and dance and in his explicit depiction

¹⁹⁹ Gustave Moreau, *Salome Dancing Before Herod*, 1874–1876, oil on canvas, 143.5 x 104.3 cm, Hammer Museum, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2012/a-strange-magic-gustave-moreaus-salome>

²⁰⁰ Gustave Moreau, *The Apparition*, 1876–1877, oil on canvas, 55.9 x 46.7 cm, Harvard Art Museum, <https://hvard.art/o/299926>

²⁰¹ Neginsky, *Salome*, 150–151.

of the passion that she aroused in Herod and all those who watched. Perhaps more than any of the other preceding Salome's, Flaubert's Salome and her dance are decidedly erotic, intentionally making Salome not only the center of attention and desire, but also through her overt sexuality endowing her with power over the entire room, even Herod. She has become the ultimate dangerous woman, performing a dance that not only seduces and controls men, but also leads to the death of John the Baptist.

Many of the details in Flaubert's account invoke the idea of what the French considered to be exotic, a feature that Bonis heavily draws upon in her music. In Salome's dance, Flaubert mentions the use of a flute and hand cymbals.²⁰² As mentioned previously, contemporary French audiences would have associated these instruments (particularly within the context of a dance) with the exotic. Flaubert further invoked the cultural obsession with the "Orient" when he wrote, "She danced like the priestess of the Indies, like the Nubian girls of the cataracts, like the bacchantes of Lydia... She threw herself on her hands with her heels in the air and in this pose she crossed from one side of the platform to the other like an enormous beetle."²⁰³ Flaubert had traveled extensively in Egypt and had seen this move, which was associated with rituals in the temples of Isis, performed by Egyptian dancers.²⁰⁴ Pierre-Marc de Biasi, an expert on Flaubert, writes that Flaubert would have seen Salome's dance as "a way of revisiting the Orient that he had known in 1850. . . the landscape and the erotic memories."²⁰⁵

J.-K. Huysmans' literary depiction of Moreau's Salome paintings in his 1884 novel *À rebours* (*Against Nature*) directly influenced Oscar Wilde's conception of Salome and in many ways synthesizes the themes and qualities of preceding Salome's. The main character of the

²⁰² Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales*, trans. Roger Whitehouse (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 100.

²⁰³ Flaubert, *Three Tales*, 101.

²⁰⁴ Neginsky, *Salome*, 159–161.

²⁰⁵ Neginsky, *Salome*, 161.

novel, des Esseintes, contemplates Moreau's *Salome Dancing before Herod*. The narrator neatly summarizes des Esseintes' feelings about Salome, sentiments that Salome's viewers throughout all the various retellings have shared:

She was no longer just a dancer who, through the depraved gyration of her loins, wrested a cry of desire and lust from an old man, who could break the spirit and wear down the will of a king through the rise and fall of her breasts, the undulations of her belly and the quivering of her thighs; she had become, in some sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible Lust, the goddess of immortal Hysteria, an accursed Beauty, exalted above all others by a catalepsy that stiffens her flesh and hardens her muscles; a monstrous Beast, indifferent, irresponsible, insensible, poisoning, like Helen of antiquity, everyone who comes near her, everyone who sees her, everyone she touches.²⁰⁶

Huysmans captures not only the physical allure of Salome, but also the perceived peril of her independence and sexuality, ideas directly related to nineteenth-century French society's fears about women. Huysmans also comments on the exotic elements of Moreau's paintings, providing further evidence of the culture's awareness of these icons. He mentions the lotus (the sacred flower of Egypt and India) in Salome's hand, and conjectures about its possible meaning; does it connote fertility as in Hindu myth? Does it represent death and purification as it is used in the Egyptian embalming ceremonies? Does it have sexual connotations as in religions of India?²⁰⁷ Furthermore, he compares the palace in *The Apparition* to the Alhambra in Spain with its Moorish details, a further reference to the French idea of the exotic.²⁰⁸ Huysmans not only elaborates on the nature of Salome, but also provides valuable cultural insight into Belle Époque France.

²⁰⁶ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature (À rebours)*, trans. Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2008), 83–84.

²⁰⁷ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 84–85.

²⁰⁸ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 85.

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* represents the ultimate culmination of the nineteenth-century French craze over Salome; Salome finally becomes a main character in her own right, exerting her deathly power and influence with confidence. Wilde's Salome also has unique ties to the past and future; his incorporation of symbolism and symbolist icons such as the moon and hair point to the present and future, while his Biblical references bring the Salome tale back to its origins. Wilde wrote *Salome* in 1891 while he was living in Paris.²⁰⁹ Although he drew inspiration from the *Salome* of Heine, Regnault, Moreau, Flaubert, Huysmans and various other artists and authors, Wilde succeeded in making his *Salome* original by dwelling on Salome's desire and its destructive consequences rather than her external traits as in earlier versions.²¹⁰ Contrary to other versions of the tale, Salome actually meets and interacts with John the Baptist while he is imprisoned. The ensuing dialogue between the two parodies the Bible's Song of Songs, but Wilde notably flips the gender script. In Song of Songs, the man acts as the lover, wooing the lady, but in Wilde's play, Salome becomes the lover with John the Baptist being the recipient of her affections.

Salome is obsessed with John's body: "I am amorous of thy body, Iokanaan!"²¹¹ Thy body is white, like the lilies of a field that the mower hath never mowed. . . Suffer me to touch thy body."²¹² Compare Salome's description of John's hair with the language of Song of Songs; Salome declares, "Thy hair is like clusters of grapes, like the clusters of black grapes that hang from the vine-trees of Edom in the land of the Edomites."²¹³ In Song of Songs, the Lover says, "Your hair is like a flock of goats going down from Gilead."²¹⁴ One can also observe parallels in the descriptions of the mouth. Salome says, "Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of

²⁰⁹ Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, ed. Kimberly J. Stern (Peterborough, Ontario, Canada: Broadview Editions, 2015), 18, 39.

²¹⁰ Neginsky, *Salome*, 168–169.

²¹¹ Iokanaan is the name Wilde uses for John the Baptist.

²¹² Wilde, *Salome*, 59–60.

²¹³ Wilde, *Salome*, 60.

²¹⁴ Song 6:5 (NKJV).

ivory. It is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory.”²¹⁵ The Lover in Song of Songs says, “Your lips are like a strand of scarlet, and your mouth is lovely. Your temples behind your veil are like a piece of pomegranate.”²¹⁶

Salome is no longer trying to please her mother or Herod—she knows what she wants and has no qualms about expressing that. She fixates on kissing him, first repeatedly saying “Suffer me to kiss thy mouth,” and then eventually declaring, “I will kiss thy mouth, Iokanaan.”²¹⁷ John’s repeated harsh rebuttals of her advances anger her; when Herod promises her anything she’d like if she dances for him, Salome dances solely to request the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Her final words in the play are as follows,

Ah! I have kissed thy mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood?...Nay; but perchance it was the taste of love..They say that love hath a bitter taste...But what matter? what matter? I have kissed the mouth, Iokanaan, I have kissed thy mouth.²¹⁸

Salome has completed her transformation—no longer a dutiful daughter and prop in John the Baptist’s death as in the Bible, no longer a sexual icon for men’s gratification as in Flaubert; she has become an independent aggressor, initiating the gratification of her own desire, “poisoning, like Helen of antiquity, everyone who comes near her, everyone who sees her, everyone she touches.”²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, 61.

²¹⁶ Song 4:3 (NKJV).

²¹⁷ Wilde, *Salome*, 62.

²¹⁸ Wilde, *Salome*, 85.

²¹⁹ Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 84.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INTERSECTION OF STORY AND MUSIC: A PROGRAMMATIC MUSICAL ANALYSIS

While there is much to admire about Bonis's music, perhaps its most striking feature is the brilliant marriage of programmatic inspiration with the actual music. The music is full of references to each woman's story, and these musical features become increasingly clear as one grasps the relevant details of each woman and the culture's perception of these female figures. This chapter will focus on specific musical traits that connect with the women's narratives. In addition to the programmatic connections, a synopsis of the unique musical features of each piece will be woven into the discussion, providing not only interpretative inspiration but also a general understanding of Bonis's musical style.

Mélisande

Bonis composed *Mélisande* in 1898, and her use of texture, harmony, and articulation bring to life the images of hair, water, and unrequited love that *Mélisande* represented during Bonis's time period. The opening (see Fig. 4.1) is striking, with luxurious arpeggios and intertwining harmonies immediately conjuring a musical representation of Pelleas's exclamation when *Mélisande*'s hair tumbles out of the tower: "Your hair, your hair, is cascading down on me!"²²⁰ The prevalence of these arpeggios and quick broken patterns, which continue from the opening until m. 50 (10 bars from the conclusion, see Fig. 4.3), cannot be a coincidence and must have programmatic significance. Aside from evoking moving water or flowing hair, the

²²⁰ Maeterlinck, *A Maeterlinck Reader*, 213.

repetitiveness of the figurations can also be seen as a link to the dreamy, repetitious world that characterizes the play and the Symbolist literary movement.



Figure 4.1 *Mélisande*, mm. 1–5

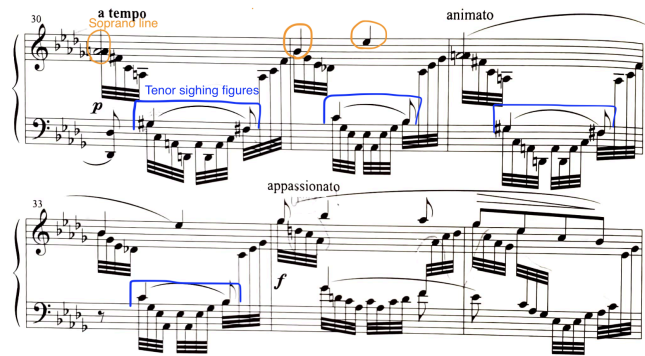


Figure 4.2 *Mélisande*, mm. 30–35

Bonis was not content to simply capture the hair and water in *Mélisande*'s story, however; she also weaves in polyphony that suggests a duet, a reference to Pelleas and *Mélisande*'s relationship. Examples of this occur in mm. 26–28 and mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.2). In m. 26, the soprano voice reaches a climactic moment and soars above the alto figurations in disjunct motion. The tenor enters on the second half of the first beat of the measure and moves by step. Offsetting the entrances of these voices by half a beat and juxtaposing the melodic contours of each voice creates the impression of two voices dialoguing. A similar technique is used in mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.2). The tenor again enters half a beat after the soprano and sings in compact two or three note phrases, whereas the soprano is written in longer phrases. The conclusion of each voice's phrase is staggered, once again mimicking a conversation or duet. This section's marking of *animato* and *appassionato* strengthens the idea of a passionate exchange.

The abrupt change to a chorale texture in m. 50 has a couple of possible interpretations (see Fig. 4.3). The rich counterpoint could be a denser version of the idea of Pelleas and *Mélisande*'s duet. One could also choose to see this as a religious or heavenly reference, which

could connect to Pelleas and Mélisande’s death at the end of the play. Another possible interpretation is to focus on the significance of the slower notes values. Between the sudden loss of perpetual motion and the spotlighting of beautiful seventh chords, there is a certain sense of serenity, joy, and euphoria which could point towards Pelleas and Mélisande’s rapture in their tryst outside the tower.



Figure 4.3 *Mélisande*, mm. 50–60

As noted in chapter three, Mélisande’s hair was luscious in both Pelleas and the culture’s eyes, and Bonis captures that in the harmonic language. The piece is in D-flat major and is tonal; however, the harmonic scheme is not functionally tonal. The harmonies elide and slither, evading expected resolutions and visiting unexpected key areas. For example, the first four measures (see Fig. 4.1) oscillate between the A-flat dominant ninth harmony and a C-flat dominant seventh chord before eventually working their way to E-flat minor in m. 7. The V7 chord in m. 10 creates a strong expectation of tonic, but Bonis “resolves” the V7 by moving to an E-flat minor ninth chord instead of the expected D-flat major. Throughout the piece, these unexpected harmonic changes are often achieved through a series of small interval shifts, such as in mm. 14–16 (see Fig. 4.4). As the bass voice descends by half-step, the permutations of the harmonies above

suggest sunlight glinting off of hair or water. The constant unexpected shifts of harmonies also mirror Mélisande's quick emotional mood changes and the fluidity of her character.

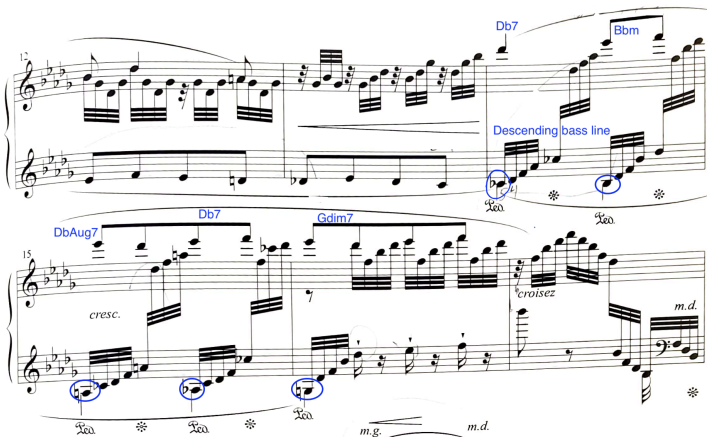


Figure 4.4 *Mélisande*, mm. 12–17

Seventh chords of all types—diminished, dominant, and major—prevail, as do ninth chords. These chords not only create a rich tapestry of harmonic color, but also serve to obscure the key. Despite the tonic of D-flat major, the piece opens with an A-flat dominant ninth arpeggio, and there is no tonic chord until m. 39, where a D-flat major seventh chord appears for the first time. Not until the last measure does a simple D-flat major chord appear and officially confirm the key. This ambiguous harmonic world mimics the ambiguity of the atmosphere in Maeterlink's play.

Finally, Bonis's choice of articulation supports the idea of water imagery and unrequited love. In mm. 16, 22, and 24, the left hand is marked with staccatissimo symbols, a sharp contrast to the surrounding sea of slurs (see Fig. 4.4). This marking would be used three years later in 1901 by Maurice Ravel in his famous water piece, *Jeux d'Eau*.

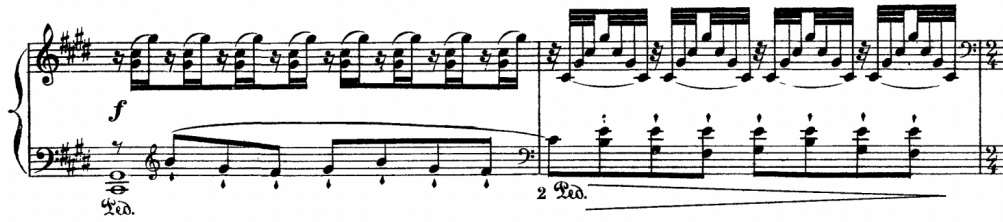


Figure 4.5 Maurice Ravel, *Jeux d'Eau*, mm. 15–16²²¹

The wide assortment of water sounds achieved by the variety of articulation in Ravel's piece was notable, so it is plausible that Bonis was using this articulation in her own imaginative way to evoke water before Ravel solidified this connotation. Also notable is the contrast between long and short slurs. Two-note slurs appear in mm. 18, 20, and 30–33 (see Fig. 4.2). In a piece that uses long lines to suggest hair, these short slurs are notable and can be interpreted as sighing figures. In mm. 18 and 20, these slurs are accompanied by the marking *espress.* which supports the significance of these phrases. In mm. 30–33, these sighing figures occur over dissonant harmonies, amplifying the idea of longing and discontentment and correlating with Pelleas and Mélisande's tragic love.

Desdémona

Desdémona (1913) is the only piece of the set in which Bonis included an epigraph. It is from the French poet Maurice Bouchor's *Chansons de Shakespeare*: "The poor soul sat at the foot of the sycamore/ Sang the soft willow again and again."²²² Upon a first reading, this excerpt might seem confusing; however, it actually provides the key to interpreting the music. In *Othello*, Désdemona sings a song called "Willow" passed down to her from her mother's maid.²²³ The song was mournful, expressing unrequited love, and Désdemona sang it the night she was

²²¹ Maurice Ravel, *Piano masterpieces of Maurice Ravel* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 14.

²²² Mel Bonis, *Volume 1: Femmes de Légende*, trans. Robert Cushing, 20.

²²³ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 170.

murdered after concluding that Othello no longer loved her.²²⁴ I believe that Bonis wrote *Desdémona* to be the willow song.

Several musical features support this interpretation beyond the inclusion of the epigraph. *Desdémona* is the simplest piece of the collection, technically, harmonically, and formally. The tonic of E minor is firmly established from the beginning of the piece, and its ternary form is evident. Unlike other pieces of the set, the texture remains relatively uniform, mainly featuring a singing melody in the right hand and accompaniment in the left hand. Furthermore, the melody itself (first introduced in mm. 1–5, see Fig. 4.6) is quite vocal, maintaining a range of a fifth and fitting a voice well. Lastly, the meter never varies from 3/4. This lack of meter change is a marked feature compared to the frequent meter changes in the other pieces of the set. *Desdémona's* lack of complexity is striking, but also purposeful. It is meant to be Desdémona's song, expressing her anguish over her husband's change of attitude towards her.



line by moving in contrasting motion with the soprano. Perhaps Desdémona is imagining a duet with Othello in these passages. One can also examine the left hand's accompanimental pattern for implied counterpoint as well (see Fig. 4.6). While the lower notes remain constant, the upper notes change. Since they are not double stemmed, it is unclear whether these notes should be treated as a separate voice or as belonging to the accompaniment. Given the ABA form, performers could choose to vary the treatment of these voices between the two outer sections. Regardless of how one chooses to analyze this feature, these notes in the pattern add color to the music and often facilitate changes between harmonies.



Figure 4.7 *Desdémona*, mm. 19–28

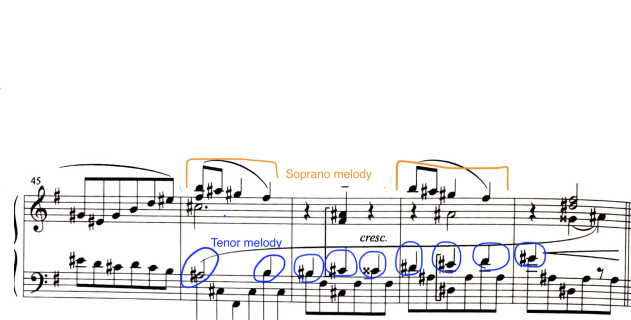


Figure 4.8 *Desdémona*, mm. 45–49

Bonis uses detailed expressive markings to amplify particularly significant musical moments. For instance, she marks the opening *con malinconia* and *dolce*. This further supports the idea of the melody being Desdémona's song. *Othello* makes clear that Desdémona's song is melancholy, but throughout her ordeal with Othello, Desdémona remains loyal and sweet. These opening expressive markings convey the emotions of this dramatic moment in the play. Mm. 11–12 are marked *senza rigore*, which I interpret as a reference to the personal nature of the song. Desdémona is singing her song at a particularly vulnerable juncture of her story, so it is not hard to imagine her song ebbing and flowing, following her moods. *Con espressione* is used in m. 17, and this coincides with the melody transitioning to the tenor register and steadily

descending. Bonis marks the introduction of the second theme in m. 22 (harmonized in thirds now instead of single notes as in the main theme) *con grazia* (see Fig. 4.7). I find it significant that Bonis uses very specific character markings for both of the main themes. These provide insight into Bonis’s interpretation of Desdémone’s song and are essential in capturing the nuances of the music’s subtle shifts. While not a marking related directly to character, the *animez* marking in m. 50 and the subsequent *poco accel.* in m. 54 are noteworthy, as they contrast with the *andantino* tempo that characterizes the rest of the music (see Fig. 4.9). This section also contains faster note values, shorter phrases, and the passing of the melody between registers. The noted faster tempo pulls the music away from its previous vocal nature. I hear this section as the heart of the piece; Desdémone’s emotions have transcended her song and become more like musical fantasies, flying away before reigning themselves back into the song again in m. 56.

The image shows a musical score for three systems of music, numbered 50, 53, and 55. Each system consists of a piano part (left hand) and a violin part (right hand). The key signature is three flats (B-flat major or D minor). The first system (mm. 50-52) includes markings for *mf* and *cresc.*, and a blue annotation 'animez' with a bracket over the first measure. The second system (mm. 53-54) includes a marking for *poco accel.* and a blue annotation 'Registral shifts in melody' with arrows pointing to specific notes in both parts. The third system (mm. 55-59) includes markings for *dim. e poco rit.* and *a tempo*, and a dynamic marking of *p*. The score features various rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

Figure 4.9 *Desdémone*, mm. 50–59

Lastly, Bonis’s use of tonal areas is emotionally expressive. The main theme is in E minor, but from there, the harmonies move to D major, C major, B major, B minor, then A minor before settling into the C major that ushers in the second theme in m. 22. This harmonic descent

downwards could be a programmatic element, indicating Desdémona's despair. It could also be Bonis's way of adding unexpected color. The quick shift from B major to B minor in mm. 11–12 is particularly poignant and reminiscent of Schubert's use of modal mixture to create emotional effects. This same technique occurs in mm. 34–35, as the tenor voice slips from the D-sharp of the B major chord to B natural, shifting the passage into B minor and completely transforming the mood.



Figure 4.10 *Desdémona*, mm. 34–35

Similarly, in mm. 41–44, the music shifts from G major to F-sharp major. The sweet, ethereal quality of F-sharp major is expressively effective, especially as it coincides with the introduction of the tenor voice as discussed previously. To transition back into E minor for the A' section, Bonis uses common tone modulation. In m. 56, the first theme is presented in A-flat minor. The C-flat in the accompaniment becomes a B-natural in m. 64, and the other voices move to form E minor (see Fig. 4.11). This creates a smooth elision back to tonic, and the contrast of the A-flat minor harmony being presented so closely to the E minor harmony is an effective color shift that signals the return of the A section.

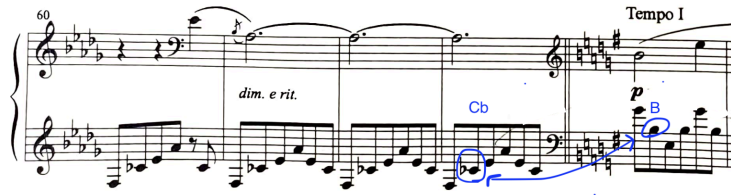


Figure 4.11 *Desdémona* mm. 60–64

Ophélie

Bonis's musical depiction of Ophélie (date of composition unknown) contains many programmatic elements that relate to Shakespeare's Ophélie and the Belle Époque cultural fascination with this character. The music is unsettling and depicts a steady decline into madness, reinforcing the idea that Ophélie is most interesting and compelling when she is driven to lunacy. The piece opens with rolled chords—E-flat major, which moves to a D dominant seventh, which moves to a B fully-diminished seventh (see Fig. 4.12). Between each chord is a B-flat pedal point. This is a curious opening; how does a D dominant seventh chord and a B fully-diminished seventh chord belong at the opening of a piece in E-flat major? Bonis acknowledges the strangeness and provides an interpretive clue in the accompanying expressive marking of *mystérieux*. I believe that these chords have a dual function; the rolled motion of the chords suggest water and foreshadow Ophélie's watery death, and the non-functional harmonies are a subtle suggestion of Ophélie's madness. The ensuing five bars that serve as a bridge to the first melody prominently features a tritone—a recurring A-flat to D set in a broken figuration. This evocative interval enhances the sense of unease caused by the harmonies.

Figure 4.12 *Ophélie*, mm. 1–6

Figure 4.13 *Ophélie*, mm. 7–12

The main melody first appears in mm. 9–11 (see Fig. 4.13). It too is unusual; it contains a C-flat and G-flat. The underlying harmony appears to modulate to C-flat major, but then pivots to a G-flat augmented chord at the end of the melody. The melody is marked *avec mélancolie*, a further identification with Ophélie’s sorrow. The second melody quickly succeeds this melody, and it is this second melody that becomes structurally and programmatically significant. First occurring in mm. 13–14, its conjunct motion is a welcome relief to the eeriness created by the chromatic leaps of the first melody (see Fig. 4.14). I hear this melody as “Ophélie’s tune.”

Figure 4.14 *Ophélie* mm. 13–14

The short, fragmented nature of the tune and the voice-like quality of the melody resembles the fragments of songs that Ophélie sang in her madness. It is not without its quirks, however; this melody is accompanied by the key signature switching to four sharps. It is impossible to

ascertain the new key; a D-sharp dominant seventh chord in second inversion is outlined in the bass underneath the melody before the music finally pivots to G-sharp minor.

These two melodies in Fig. 4.13 and Fig. 4.14 set up the conflict that unfolds throughout the remainder of the piece. Other melodic snippets alternate with each other and the opening melody in an increasingly agitated texture. These additional melodies can be heard as snatches of other songs that Ophélie sang. Notes begin to move faster and faster, swooping and circling around tonal centers such as B-flat major, F minor, and A-flat minor. This texture and gradual shortening of note values serve to subtly increase tension and escalate the general sense of unrest, mirroring the escalation of Ophélie's emotional tension. The first climactic arrival happens with the build to C-flat major in m. 26, which also coincides with the introduction of a third theme (see Fig. 4.15). This theme appears in the tenor, and while it is divided into four slurs, it holds together as one long, impassioned line. One has to wonder if the intentional breaking of the longer line into smaller slurs is meant to convey the breaking down of Ophélie's mind; this musical technique suggests correlations with Shakespeare's account of how Ophélie's increasing madness caused her mind, songs, and actions to fall apart.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Ophélie', measures 25 through 32. It consists of four systems of music. The first system (measures 25-26) features a piano accompaniment in the left hand and a vocal line in the right hand. The vocal line is marked 'cresc.' and 'ben canto con Ped.'. The piano accompaniment has a 'Theme 3' highlighted in blue. The second system (measures 27-28) continues the piano accompaniment and vocal line. The third system (measures 29-30) features a piano accompaniment with a 'Theme 2 "Ophelia's tune"' highlighted in orange. The fourth system (measures 31-32) continues the piano accompaniment and vocal line. The piano accompaniment is marked 'p' and 'doux, tranquille'. The vocal line is marked 'p'.

Figure 4.15 *Ophélie*, mm. 25–32

This technique of melodic fragmentation drives the music's build to a breaking point. This final build begins in m. 32 with a full statement of the second theme. This is promptly sequenced up by a minor third and repeated in m. 35. However, this theme is broken down to only its first five notes in m. 39 and repeated in m. 40. The addition of three notes of the theme in the left hand in m. 40 and the subsequent arrival at the *fortissimo* in m. 41 (marked *appassionato*) creates a breathless intensity and an obsessive sense of repetition, which I view as Ophélie's singing becoming increasingly crazy (see Fig. 4.16).

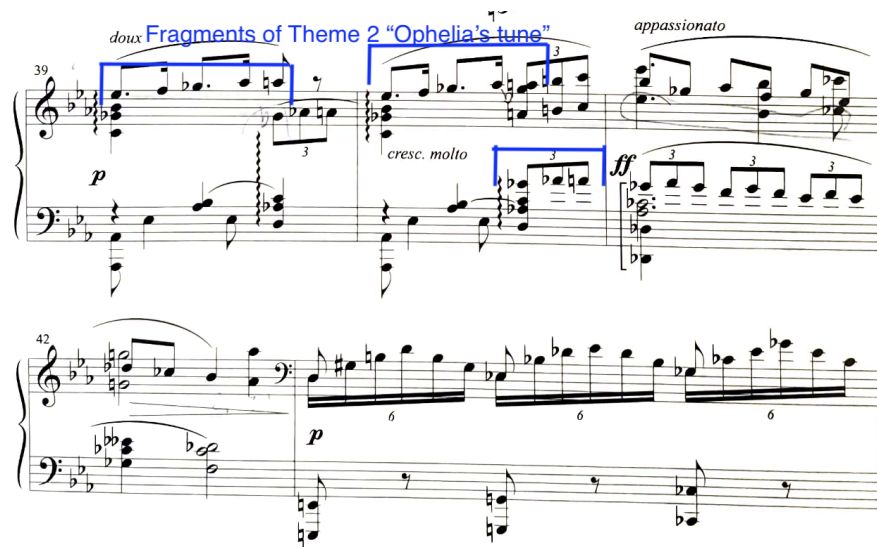


Figure 4.16 *Ophélie*, mm. 39–43

The third theme's reappearance in m. 48 heralds Ophélie's breaking point; the melodic line spirals out of the third theme into A-flat minor and soars upwards in a repeated melodic gesture. The *serrez* in m. 52 amplifies the maddening circularity of the melody, and the abrupt breaking of the pattern and ensuing silence due to the fermata over the barline of m. 54 is a haunting dramatic event (see Fig. 4.17). This moment is strongly reminiscent of Ophélie's death scene in *Hamlet*. The musical intensification that occurs due to rhythmic diminution, and the cyclic repetition of the melody in the unexpected and anguished key of A-flat minor represents

Ophélie finally exploding from the mental and emotional tension. The sudden break in the pattern and ensuing silence is the breaking of the tree branch upon which Ophélie has been sitting and her tumble into the river.



Figure 4.17 *Ophélie*, mm. 50–54

This interpretation is supported by the ensuing musical material. The dramatic silence is broken by rolled chords, similar to those in the opening. This time, however, the chords do not repeat; they simply steadily descend into the second theme. There is none of the circular rumination of the first bars; Ophélie's lunacy is finally over. Bonis uses expressive markings to denote the emotional and narrative differences that separate the appearance of the second theme in m. 57 from its earlier versions. This time, the theme is marked *adagio* and *lointain* as opposed to the earlier *tranquille*. The restless accompaniment patterns have been replaced by long chords and echoes of the melody in the left hand. Just as in *Hamlet*, Ophélie is floating placidly on the water still singing her song, but she is fading. In a final gasp for life, the music spins itself into a chromatic variation of the second theme and reaches a quick fortissimo moment, before floating away on rolled chords. The conclusion of the piece on an E-flat major chord is striking. After so much chromaticism, modulation, and harmonic ambiguity, the achievement of tonic at the end provides a final release of tension and signals Ophélie's ultimate release from madness.

Viviane

While the Viviane character appears in different contexts throughout literature, I believe that Bonis chose to highlight Viviane's role as a water nymph and Lady of the Lake in this 1909 composition. The music has many features which relate to the depiction of water, as well as playful and seductive qualities which connect to the cultural fascination with water sirens and nymphs. In fact, Bonis's musical interpretation of these themes intimately links all these ideas. Musical features which can be connected with Viviane also relate to the concept of a water piece, just as Viviane's impish and seductive nature is tied to musical depictions of water. It is this creative marriage of a musical waterscape with Viviane's personality that makes the music compelling.

This fusion of water and personality can be observed from the first measures (see fig. 4.18). The gently undulating left hand suggests the motion of water, with the right hand's two-note slurs offering smaller ripples. Neither hands function solely as a depiction of water, however; the left hand is also the melody, and the right hand's slurs can be interpreted as either pleading or suggestive. Note the metrical placement of the right hand slurs; within the first twenty-five measures of the $3/8$ time signature, all but one of the slurs occur on the weak beats of two or three. This introduces an unexpected element of conflict, illustrating the more devious side of Viviane. Another distinctive feature of the music is the sixteenth note triplets that occur in the melodic line and are a key contributor to the flirtatious and impish nature of the music. This first occurs in m. 7, where the triplet is both playful and vocal, suggesting that this melodic line is Viviane singing. This is even more clear in mm. 20–25 (see Fig. 4.19). The triplet figure occurs twice in this one phrase, further solidifying the spritely nature of the theme.

Figure 4.18 *Viviane* mm. 1–12

Figure 4.19 *Viviane*, mm. 19–24

In m. 26, the music embarks upon a new theme that reveals more of Viviane’s many different moods (see Fig. 4.20). This new theme is in B-flat minor instead of the tonic G-flat major. The triplet figure does not appear, and instead, a plaintive descending melody emerges in mm. 26–29. The sadness of this melody is quickly transformed by m. 34, however, as the music elides into D-flat major and soars upwards. The mood shifts are not yet complete; the rapture of mm. 34–39 is interrupted by an impish left hand in mm. 40–43. While the right hand melody flows downwards in a long legato line, the left hand is divided into one-measure slurs that incorporate lively sixteenth notes and disrupt the right hand’s four-measure phrase. I see these passages (mm 26–43) as a musical representation of Viviane’s mercurial nature. In the B-flat minor section, she is pretending to be sad, which makes sense given how quickly the music shifts back to major. The soaring quality of the major is then quickly undercut by the mischievous. This is Tennyson’s version of Viviane—wily and manipulative.

Figure 4.20 *Viviane*, mm. 25–42

Viviane's siren song begins in D-flat major in mm. 83–92 (see Fig. 4.21). Instead of the two and four-measure phrases that have come before, the melody is now in a long eight-measure phrase. F to A-flat is a recurring interval, and the repetitiveness of this creates a hypnotic, seductive effect. I hear this melody as a reference to *Ondine*, a siren who sang beautiful songs to lure men to their demise in her watery kingdom. The left hand's countermelody composed of two-note slurs accompanies the song of the right hand. These slurs provide a rocking motion that maintains the impression of a waterscape while also underscoring the pleading, manipulative nature of *Viviane*.

Figure 4.21 *Viviane*, mm. 81–92

As one might expect, *Viviane* cannot remain in one mood for long; she abruptly switches to flirtatious in mm. 93–100 (see Fig. 4.22). The left hand's stubborn entrances on the second beat of the measure and flippant rhythms break the trance she has just created. A more extended

version of the siren song happens in G-flat major from mm. 101–129. In addition to the other features already discussed, one should note the articulation in mm. 115–119. Slurred staccatos are notated for the left hand, which crosses over the right hand to play in the treble. This creates the effect of water droplets splashing around the main melody.



Figure 4.22 *Viviane*, mm. 93–100

Mm. 130–141 form a transition back into the main theme. Half-steps are particularly important and appear as part of two-note slurs. This vivid interval not only enhances the pleading quality of the music but also adds a sense of questioning and urgency that vanishes suddenly in a spray of water, represented by the run of notes in mm. 136–137. The main theme returns in m. 142, and one expects it to closely mirror mm. 1–25 and conclude the piece. However, Bonis reprises the G-flat major siren theme in mm. 163–174 (see Fig. 4.23). This time, the song does not stay within the key but rather uses a descending chromatic scale in the bass to guide the melody through various key areas. There is something not only alluring but also slightly threatening in this alteration that reflects Tennyson’s depiction of Viviane. The piece concludes with a return to the spritely material of the beginning and bubbles away in a spray of staccato notes, triplet turns, and two-note slurs.

Figure 4.23 *Viviane*, mm. 159–176

Phoebé

Phoebé (1909) is a color piece that suggests silvery moonlight, mystery, and spaciousness in its harmonic ambiguity, texture, and phrasing. *Phoebé* is unique in *Femmes de Légende*, as it is the only piece that does not end conclusively in a key. Despite maintaining five flats in the signature throughout the piece, neither the beginning or the end of the piece suggest D-flat major or B-flat minor. In fact, the music concludes with A-flat octaves in the left hand and a D-flat and B-flat in the right hand. At the beginning, the left hand plays the first three measures alone (see Fig. 4.24). Its scalar-type passagework can be analyzed either as a pentatonic scale, A-flat mixolydian mode, or as an E-flat minor seventh chord over an A-flat pedal tone. Due to the A-flats which conclude the piece, I believe that analyzing this opening passagework as part of the A-flat mixolydian mode makes the most sense, but the music is sufficiently ambiguous to allow for different interpretations. The melody's entrance in m. 4 fits within the A-flat mixolydian mode, however, and does make the mixolydian interpretation of the melody the neatest solution.

In m. 12, both the left and right hands change (see Fig. 4.25). The right hand maintains its previous melodic contour but is now an octatonic scale. The left hand defies easy categorization, but analyzing the pattern as an E fully-diminished seventh chord over the A-flat pedal tone seems to fit best. Despite these changes, notice that the A-flat pedal tone has not changed. This is a common feature throughout the piece; despite various changes in the harmonies and textures, there is usually a pedal tone or common note that serves to anchor the other changes. Mm. 20–21 contains the only reference to D-flat major, but it is brief. The melody in m. 22 switches back to an octatonic scale. Continuing the trend of mysterious harmonies, mm. 27–29 feature a chain of broken, staccato augmented chords that usher in an E-flat tonality in the left hand (see Fig. 4.26). The right hand undermines this stability by first utilizing an octatonic scale in mm. 31–33, and then a whole-tone scale in mm. 34–36 (see Fig. 4.27). These modes and non-traditional scales could be interpreted as Bonis’s nod to the culture’s darker association of the moon with lunacy. There is certainly something unsettling about a definite tonic never being established, and Bonis may have intended this to correlate with the moon’s complex connotations.

Figure 4.24 *Phoebé*, mm. 1–11

Figure 4.25 *Phoebé*, mm. 12–14



Figure 4.26 *Phoebé*, mm. 27–29



Figure 4.27 *Phoebé*, mm. 33–38

The most tonal section of the piece occurs from mm. 38–51 (see Fig. 4.28). The harmonies transition from A-flat major to A-flat minor, to G-flat major, to F-sharp minor, to finally A major through a series of common tone modulations and enharmonic respellings. The use of this technique rather than modulation through functional harmonic progressions is responsible for the mysterious atmosphere and creates an almost dreamlike world since none of the harmonies are grounded in expected tonal progressions. The melody in mm. 56–61 is octatonic, but in m. 62, the opening A-flat mixolydian melody and accompaniment returns, concluding the piece.



Figure 4.28 *Phoebé*, mm. 39–52

The texture and melodic content of the piece are also key factors in creating a dreamy sound world. The left hand passagework functions as a hypnotic drone; it remains unchanged for the first eleven measures of the piece. Even though the pitches of the left hand subsequently change throughout the rest of the piece, it is rare that the left hand ever plays outside of this continuous rising and falling pattern, and it tends to move in blocks (maintaining a set of pitches for a few measures, then changing to new pitches and maintaining those for several measures). This creates a sense of stasis which supports the idea of the music being spacious. In addition, although the right hand's melodic content varies between modes and octatonic and whole-tone scales, the melodic contour almost never changes in these scale-like passages, contributing to the hypnotic effect of the music. Even in the previously discussed tonal section of mm. 38–51 (see Fig. 4.28) which does feature a change in melodic material, the constant spinning of the accompanimental pattern keeps the listener in a trance. This is in fact one of the key textural features of the piece—from the beginning of the piece, the sixteenth notes are in perpetual motion until they melt away two measures before the final measure. Not only does this evoke a trance-like state, it also provides a canvas upon which the melody and harmonic colors can shine.

Phrasing is the other distinctive feature of the piece that creates the impression of spaciousness and time. First, melodic lines enter on unexpected beats—either the second beat or the second half of the first beat. This is not only unexpected but also creates space before the melodic line. After the melodic phrase, there is usually one measure of accompaniment without melody, and often it is even two measures. This creative way of generating breath and space both before and after a phrase gives the illusion of spacious music. Related to this idea, Bonis demands that almost the entire piece be played legato. These seemingly unending, smooth lines not only conjure the dreaminess of the piece, but also make the music feel timeless. Overall,

Bonis’s unique phrasing, use of modes, non-traditional scales, and an ambiguous harmonic scheme reflect the culture’s association with the moon—dreaminess on the one hand, and lunacy on the other.

Salomé

Salomé’s legacy in literature and artwork is unambivalent—seductive, wild, unpredictable, exotic—this woman made a distinct impression in all her artistic appearances. Bonis captures all of these traits in her 1909 musical depiction of Salomé. Salomé is fundamentally chaotic and unpredictable; Bonis’s use of meter and quick switches in material convey these traits. The opening meter is 2/4+3/4, which serves to thwart any expected accent or metrical patterns. Bonis further exploits this unpredictability by adding *sforzandi* and varying the placement of melodic notes within each bar. This can be observed in mm. 1–12 (see Fig. 4.29). The *sforzando* in m. 3 further obscures the meter, and the absence of this chord in the parallel passage in m. 5 prevents the listener from anticipating what is next. Another example occurs in m. 101, where the left hand accents the fifth eighth note in the 6/8 meter (see Fig. 4.32). Bonis continually changes meters throughout the piece, exploring 3/8, 12/8, 6/8, 3/4+2/4, and 5/8 in addition to the opening 2/4+3/4.



Figure 4.29 *Salomé*, mm. 1–12

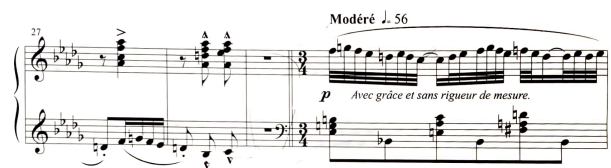


Figure 4.30 *Salomé*, mm. 27–30

Likewise, quick switches in material are ubiquitous and often coincide with meter changes. There are twelve double bars in the piece, each denoting a new section/mood/material. M. 12 captures one such abrupt transition. The fermata over the bar generates suspense, so that m. 13 is a jumpscare. The previous left hand ostinato is completely gone, the music is now *forte* instead of *piano*, and the texture is full of virtuosic flourishes. There is no connection between the two measures. Another such example occurs in mm. 28–30 (see Fig. 4.30). M. 28 ends with emphatic chords, m. 29 is a measure of silence, and then m. 30 changes the meter to 3/4 and begins a new melody, texture, and character. These are only two examples; these schizophrenic shifts are a fundamental musical feature of the piece that illustrate Salomé’s chaotic nature.

Although it might seem contrary to the idea of chaos, Bonis uses ostinatos in a way that actually enhances the volatility of the piece. Almost the entire left hand is built upon ostinatos, with the longest ostinato lasting from mm. 51–84 (see Fig. 4.31). Other ostinato patterns occur in smaller two-bar phrases, such as in mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.34). These ostinato patterns serve to build tension. They are an unchanging, driving force that creates friction with all that surrounds it, demanding resolution but refusing to resolve. They also form a canvas that seems to promise predictability; this creates the ideal environment for the right hand’s changes to shine with particular effect.



Figure 4.31 *Salomé*, mm. 53–58

Closely related to this theme of unpredictability is Salomé’s wildness. She has no reserve or boundaries, and she is a master manipulator; her personality can become whatever she needs it

to be in order to get what she wants. Bonis reflects this wildness in her use of articulation, dynamics, and virtuosity. Articulation in *Salomé* is vivid, often juxtaposing contrasting articulations within one phrase. When articulations match, it is usually for dramatic emphasis. This juxtaposition of articulations can be observed in mm. 59–62. The left hand ostinato is played *pianissimo* and slightly detached, while the right hand plays a long, legato, sinuous melody. Mm. 25–28 offers another example of this (see Fig. 4.34). The left hand is comprised of a staccato note followed by a slur, while the right hand has a single accented chord occurring on the second beat of each measure of 3/8. This pattern is broken in m. 28 when the hands finally play the chords together. More generally, the piece contains many accents, emphasizing Salomé's bold nature.

Dynamics range from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*, with plenty of *crescendos*, *decrescendos*, and gradated dynamics appearing throughout the piece. The marked specificity of dynamics suggests that dynamics not only add to the unpredictability of the music but also create certain moods. For example, in mm. 59–62, the hairpin dynamics add to the *languidamente* expressive marking of the section and creates swells that suggest longing and desire. On the opposite end of the spectrum, mm. 94–95 demonstrate a contrast between a brash *fortissimo* reached after an intense accumulation of tension, with an immediate drop to *piano* that in this context evokes playful impishness (see Fig. 4.32). One can also look at the end of the piece; mm. 134–136 represent the biggest scare of the whole piece. The music has gradually faded out to a whispered *pianissimo* when a *fortissimo* D-flat major rudely interjects to close the piece. It is as if Salomé must have the last word, and her last word musters all of the boldness and aggression for which she is famous.



Figure 4.32 *Salomé*, mm. 89–103

The virtuosic nature of the piece conveys the impression of Salomé being limitless. Technical demands range from fast passagework, to repeated notes, to parallel octaves, all occurring in fast succession and requiring a fearless approach. The swirls of notes and sheer speed not only conjure up images of Salomé dancing but also speak to her audaciousness. The flashiness of the music parallels the spectacle that Salomé created and generates the excitement with which Salomé’s audiences received her. While the virtuosity serves the music, it is also very much a component in its own right, deliberately aimed to catch attention for its own sake.

Salomé’s exotic connotations are readily apparent in Bonis’s melodic content and use of modes. As Annegret Fauser points out in her book *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair*, the French during Bonis’s time exhibited their interest in the exotic through the use of surface-level characteristics such as modes and unusual scales.²²⁵ *Salomé* is a veritable treasure trove of such characteristics. Although the piece is in D-flat major, this is only confirmed by the last chord. The rest of the piece uses modes and steadfastly avoids any resolutions that would suggest the tonic. Mm. 13–14 use the G-flat lydian mode, mm. 15–24 uses the A-flat mixolydian mode, mm. 36–37 uses A-flat lydian, and whole-tone scales occur in mm. 77–79 (see Fig. 4.35).

²²⁵ Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 140.

Aside from these modes, several melodies are closely connected with the culture’s idea of the “Oriental.” Two of these examples occur in mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.34), mm. 77–79 (see Fig. 4.35), and m. 81. These spiraling melodic figures with all their twists, turns, and chromatic colors connect with the culture’s representation of the exotic. In Figures 4.33-35, note the similarities between Bonis’s melodies and that of the famous opening violin solo in Rimsky Korsakov’s exotic *Scheherazade*:²²⁶



Figure 4.33 Rimsky Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, m. 15

Figure 4.34 *Salomé* mm. 27–36



Figure 4.35 *Salomé*, mm. 77–79

²²⁶ Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *Scheherazade: Symphonic Suite for Orchestra: Op. 35* (London: Ernst Eulenburg & Co. GmbH, 2011), 2.

While Korsakov's *Scheherazade* was supposed to evoke the Arabian, Bonis also draws from the Spanish trope as well. Compare mm. 65–67 of Bonis's *Salomé* to mm. 44–46 of Debussy's Prelude "La puerta del Vino."²²⁷

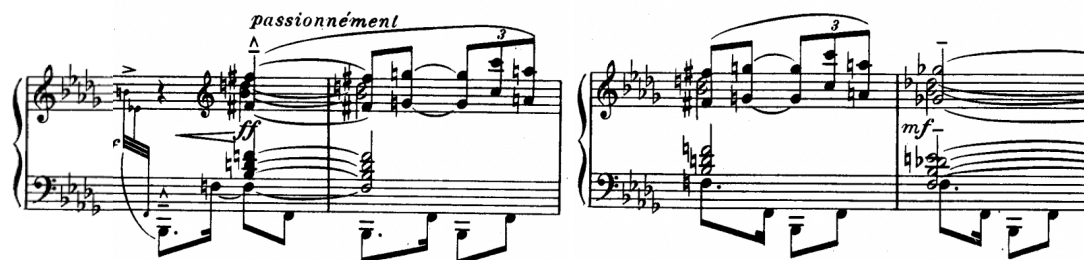


Figure 4.36 Claude Debussy, "La puerta del Vino," mm. 44–46



Figure 4.37 *Salomé*, mm. 65–67

Bonis composed her piece before Debussy, but in Figure 4.36 and Figure 4.37, the melodic content is the same in that the intervals that constitute each melody are an exact match between the examples. Since Debussy is known for capturing the Spanish spirit, it is reasonable to assume that Bonis was seeking to create the impression of the exotic, particularly since Spain was still considered to be exotic at that time.²²⁸ Implied instrumentation further supports *Salomé* as exotic. In the orchestrated version of *Salomé*, Bonis uses the flute for the melody in mm. 15–18, and employs the oboe in mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.34) and mm. 85–88. Furthermore, the repeated notes that occur in m. 39 and throughout mm. 101–108 (see Fig. 4.32) could indicate castanets, as in

²²⁷ Claude Debussy, *Complete Preludes, Books 1 and 2* (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 63.

²²⁸ Brody, *Paris*, 69.

Ravel’s “Alborada del gracioso.” The flute likely would have been associated with Arabian music and the castanets with Spanish music.

Finally, we must consider how the music relates to Salomé’s most defining trait—her erotic appeal. Certainly Bonis’s incorporation of exotic influences plays a role in this, as eroticism was widely associated with the “Orient.” In addition, the sharp contrasts and frenetic energy generated throughout the piece through the musical features already covered also connect with Salomé’s sexual energy. The striking use of unusual expressive phrases further support the idea that Bonis sought to convey this side of Salomé. Some of these phrases include *avec grâce et sans rigueur de mesure* (with grace and without rigor of measure) in m. 30, *en rêvant* (while dreaming) in m. 53, *sans rigueur* in m. 64 and m. 77, *dolce* in m. 85, plus many more markings demanding liveliness and tempo fluctuations. There is a fluidity about the music that correlates to descriptions in literature of Salomé’s famous dance. One can also make intertextual connections. Two of the biggest climaxes in the piece occur in mm. 36–37 and 89–100 (see Fig. 4.32). The texture and general contour of these sections bear a striking resemblance to the climax that happens in mm. 738–747 of Franz Liszt’s infamously suggestive Mephisto Waltz No. 1.



Figure 4.38 Franz Liszt, Mephisto Waltz No. 1, mm. 738–747²²⁹

While these moments are exciting, it is in the slower sections that Bonis perhaps most convincingly seduces her listener. Between the sensuousness of the harmonies, sinuousness of

²²⁹ Ferenc Liszt, *Liszt Ferenc: Piano Versions of His Own Works I*, ed. Imre Mezo and Imre Sulyok, New Edition of the Complete Works, Series I, Vol. 15 (Budapest: Editio Musica Budapest, 1982).

the melodies, and inexorable drone of ostinatos and pedal points, the listener is indeed lured in by *Salomé*.

Omphale

While *Omphale* (1909) has programmatic influences, the music itself is a marvel of motivic unity and economy of material. Bonis's ability to conjure a virtuosic showpiece out of one theme is remarkable, and it is no surprise that *Omphale* garnered Bonis a prize for composition by the Berlin magazine *Signale für die musikalische Welt* in 1909.²³⁰ This discussion will analyze the construction of the piece and explore musical features that correlate with a programmatic interpretation. M. 1 introduces what I will call "motive A," which consists of a repeated three-note motivic cell connected by a D-flat between the two cells. This motive is presented in retrograde in m. 2.

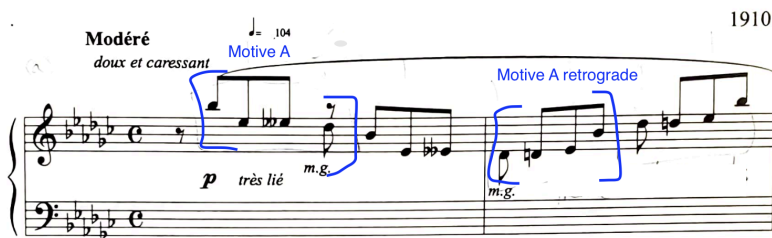


Figure 4.39 *Omphale*, mm. 1–2

The variation of this theme (what I will call motive "B") is presented in the soprano voice of m. 9 (see Fig. 4.40). The last three notes of this five-note motive are the same as motive A; however, motive A begins with a descending perfect fifth interval, whereas motive B commences with an ascending perfect fourth, the inversion of motive A's descending perfect fifth. Bonis uses these two motives in melodically distinct contexts throughout the piece, which is why I am labeling them separately despite their close relationship with each other.

²³⁰ Géliot, "Preface," 14.

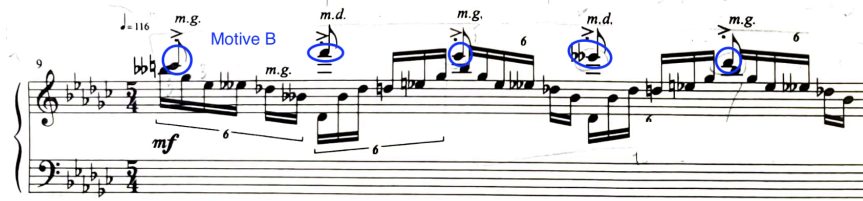


Figure 4.40 *Omphale*, m. 9

These two motives can also be mapped onto the characters of Omphale and Hercules. Motive A is typically dominant throughout the piece, appearing in the soprano and/or as the main melody. It is accompanied by long slurs and legato articulation, suggesting an elegant vocal line. Motive B appears more often in bass voices and/or as a supporting character. Its articulation is usually without slur and each note is marked with an accented staccato creating a sense of almost brutal energy and certainly less refinement than motive A. For these reasons, motive A can be interpreted as Omphale's theme, whereas motive B better reflects the qualities of Hercules.

Rhythmic manipulation is one of the main ways that Bonis disguises the appearance of these motives throughout the piece, and this is clearly demonstrated (with programmatic effect) in mm. 1–11. Motive A is presented in eighth notes in mm. 1–4, triplets in m. 5, and quadruplets in mm. 6–8, while sextuplets accompany motive B in mm. 9–11. This creates the impression of the music gradually spinning out of control. Combining this effect with the circular nature of Motive A and its retrograde constantly repeating, one is reminded of the spinning that Omphale has assigned Hercules. The music settles in mm. 15–16, and motive A is presented in retrograde as the clear melody rather than an accompanimental figure as in the opening (see Fig. 4.41). Underneath this spacious melody is running sixteenth notes which comprise motive A and its retrograde. The rhythmic differentiation between the hands helps disguise the fact that all material in this section is motive A.

Figure 4.41 *Omphale*, mm. 15–16

As the right hand spins upwards in a chromatic flurry of notes in mm. 17–18, the left hand plays motive B, sweeping the music away from G-flat major into A major. I hear this section as a musical representation of Omphale. There is something about the sensuous melodic leaps and spaciousness of the melody and tempo that connotes a regal, alluring queen and also supports the interpretation of motive A as Omphale’s theme.

The texture and mood drastically change in mm. 30–32 (see Fig. 4.42). Instead of long chromatic lines and moving accompaniment figures, motive B is presented in sixteenth note triplets marked *léger*. This section is quirky and playful, offering a connection to the humor in Omphale’s story. Between her and Hercules’s humorous run-in with Pan and their penchant for reversing gender roles and expectations, it is clear that Omphale had a sense of humor, and Bonis captures this through the quick triplets and sharp accents.

Figure 4.42 *Omphale*, mm. 29–32

The role of chromaticism in the piece is especially highlighted in mm. 33–36. The melody begins on an A and ascends chromatically through the interval of a minor ninth to reach B-flat and the first climax of the piece (mm. 36–41). This climax corresponds with a switch in key from A major to G-flat major. Motive B appears in the left hand and anchors the music while the right hand jumps registers. Even though this section releases the tension previously built by the inexorable climb of the chromatic melody, there is still conflict between the two hands. Motive B in the left hand descends over and over, while the right hand continually tries to leap registers. Even though motive B appears uncharacteristically slurred, the systematic slurring by four groups of notes instead of long lines preserves some of the brutish qualities of Hercules, and the stubborn repeated descent of motive B could suggest Hercules’s attempt to rebel at his new role of housekeeper.

Mm. 49–51 are motivically clever (see Fig. 4.43). The retrograde of motive A is woven into the right hand pattern, and the steady chromatic ascent in the bass voice can be analyzed as either an extension of motive A’s retrograde’s ascending chromatic line, or it can be interpreted as the retrograde of the second half of motive B.

The image shows a musical score for three measures (49, 50, and 51) of the piece 'Omphale'. The score is written for piano and bass. Measure 49 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. Measure 50 includes a *poco cresc.* marking. Measure 51 ends with a *dim.* marking. The right hand (treble clef) features a complex melodic line with slurs and accents. The left hand (bass clef) features a steady chromatic ascent. Annotations include 'Motive A retrograde' in blue and 'Motive A' in red, with arrows pointing to specific melodic segments in the right hand. Orange circles highlight specific notes in the bass line.

Figure 4.43 *Omphale*, mm. 49–51

Dense counterpoint is introduced in mm. 52–55, and the melody parallels that of mm. 43–44 (motive B, now in C major). This motive gets passed to the bass voice in mm. 59–61, reappearing with sharp articulation that again suggests the character of Hercules (see Fig. 4.44). Bonis then moves this theme to the alto voice in mm. 62–63, but draws from the second, third, fourth, and fifth notes of motive B rather than the third, fourth, fifth, and 1st notes of motive B as in mm. 59–61. While all of this melodic material is from motive B, the slight shift in the order of notes as well as the change in register and dynamics (*forte* to *piano*) keeps the music from sounding repetitive and even masks the similarity of the melodic material.

Figure 4.44 *Omphale*, mm. 59–64

Bonis uses this same melodic material in the left hand of mm. 87–90 to usher in the return of motive A and the conclusion of the piece. The figure is rhythmically augmented from its previous iterations and easy to miss due to the right hand’s virtuosic flourishes. The return of *Omphale*’s theme (motive A in retrograde) in m. 91 also corresponds with a “retrograde” of tempo. The first appearance of the motive in the piece served to wind the music up and generate speed, but the melody is now marked *un peu plus lent qu’au début* (a little slower than at the start). Surprisingly, new melodic material appears in mm. 95–96 (see Fig. 4.45). While it is loosely based on motive B, the intervals do not match as closely as the other examples discussed.

I hear this section as dreamy; Hercules and Omphale's thoughts are beginning to drift and are no longer as sharply focused as throughout the rest of the piece. The melodic material gently drifts back into known territory throughout mm. 97–102 (see Fig. 4.45). Throughout the right hand of these measures, motive A appears as well as its retrograde. Since the left hand has the melody and is meant to be prominently voiced, motive A is not easy to recognize aurally. Notably, in m. 102 (the final measure containing melodic material), motive B is not used. Both hands derive from the retrograde of motive A. For a piece that hinges on the interplay of these two motives, one can argue that it is programmatically significant that Omphale's theme remains alone at the end.

The image shows a musical score for three measures (96, 98, and 101) of a piece. The score is in a key with two flats and a 3/4 time signature. Measure 96 is marked 'rit.' and 'p'. A purple bracket labeled 'New material' spans measures 96 and 97. A blue bracket labeled 'Tempo I' and 'Motive A' spans measures 97 and 98. Measure 98 is marked 'poco più f' and 'poco cresc.'. Measure 101 is marked 'più p', 'rall. e dim.', and 'pp'. An orange bracket labeled 'Motive A retrograde' spans measures 101 and 102. A smaller orange bracket labeled 'Fragment of Motive A retrograde' is located in measure 102. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Figure 4.45 Omphale, mm. 96–104

Two general programmatic elements must be mentioned aside from the motivic analysis. First, virtuosity is a key component of this music. *Omphale* is the most challenging of the set of pieces, requiring great dexterity in handling the hand crossings, voicing, trills, and passagework. The showiness is an integral part of the music, and I believe it relates to the idea of Omphale being a queen. Omphale in literature and artwork is clearly portrayed not only as a ruler, but also

as an independent thinker. She is distinguished in artwork by her crossdressing tendencies, making her a “show” unto herself. Thus, the virtuosic foreground of the music is itself displaying one of Omphale’s main traits.

Second, while the piece is highly motivically structured, the harmonies are largely nonfunctional, preventing the music from sounding like it is particularly tied to a certain key (until the last measure). The highly chromatic nature of the music acts as a bridge between tonality and atonality. It keeps the music sufficiently harmonically ambiguous while serving as pivot points that allow the music to toggle between nonfunctional harmonies. Chromaticism does not just serve as a compositional technique, however; it also ties into the cultural idea of the “exotic.” As mentioned in chapter three, Omphale was known to be an “Oriental” queen, and Bonis was composing at a time when cultural interest in the idea of the exotic was high. French music written to convey the exotic during this time usually relied upon the use of surface-level characteristics such as modes and unusual scales.²³¹ Bonis was likely drawing from this cultural musical vocabulary when she chose to spin the entire piece out of an embellished chromatic scale. To listeners of her time, Bonis’s *Omphale* would have evoked their idea of the exotic and reinforced this image of Omphale.

²³¹ Fauser, *Musical Encounters*, 140.

CHAPTER FIVE

PEDAGOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In keeping with the overall lack of resources and research on *Femmes de Légende*, practical information on playing this music and pedagogical considerations in teaching this collection are nonexistent in academic literature and research. While previous chapters of this project have focused on contextualizing the music within Bonis's culture and highlighting the musical features that correlate with these programmatic elements, this chapter will provide pragmatic thoughts on teaching the music in order to encourage this collection's incorporation into the teaching repertoire. Specifically, this discussion will be divided into three sections organized by relative difficulty of the music. A summary of the main challenges of each piece and some practical solutions to these issues will be offered from the viewpoint of a teacher and performer. Interpretative decisions will be largely avoided, as the preceding chapters have provided information that will allow the performer to make their own interpretative decisions. Ultimately, this chapter supplies information that will assist teachers and students in successfully selecting and approaching this repertoire that has yet to be analyzed from a pedagogical perspective.

Easiest Pieces: *Desdémona*, *Phoebé*, and *Mélisande*

Desdémona, *Phoebé*, and *Mélisande* are the most approachable pieces in the collection and are examined here roughly in order of increasing difficulty. None of these pieces are "easy" and are most suitable for early advanced students. However, the prevalence of repeated patterns and homogeneity of texture within each of these pieces make them potentially suitable for a

precocious late intermediate student with a well-developed technique. In such a case, this repertoire would provide an engaging method of practicing flowing passagework, impressionistic layering of textures and sound, and listening to harmonic color. Octaves are common throughout each piece though, so students must have the ability to comfortably play stretches of an octave or greater.

Desdémona

Desdémona is the most technically approachable piece of *Femmes de Légende* and could be played by students at the late intermediate level. The piece does present musical challenges though and requires fluidity of sound and movement. Phrasing demands special thought and attention. The main theme throughout the piece is presented in regular four-bar phrases and essentially oscillates between the primary note and its lower neighbor. The repetition of these notes combined with their consistent placement on beats one and three creates a lilting effect and a regularity that can become tiresome. Due to programmatic considerations already discussed, I believe that this lilt serves the story of the music, but it must be thoughtfully executed.

This presents opportunities for students to work on combining listening, phrasing, and technical skills. For example: one must first be especially careful to carry the sound of the longer notes through the phrase. This involves both carefully listening to the decay of the sound after the attack, but also maintaining fluid movement with the arms. Any tension or pause of arm movements on the long notes will chop the phrase and prevent the notes from fully singing as part of an integrated phrase. Second, students should be aware of the second beat in each phrase and consider making the second beat of the measures the phrasing goal rather than the downbeat. This assists with listening and movement. Lastly, the left hand needs to be smooth and even; students must practice avoiding any exaggerated or emphasized movement of the left hand. Too

much phrasing of the left hand fragments the phrase and competes with the attention that the melodic long notes should have.

Since *Desdémona* is essentially a song, Bonis has meticulously notated slurs, and these frequently occur in two and four-bar phrases. Each entrance of a new slur should convey the sense of a breath and a fresh entrance, otherwise the music loses definition. Given the relative sparseness of the texture, this piece can provide useful practice in phrasing and breathing for students not yet ready to play Chopin nocturnes. One can experiment with contrasting dynamics and using deliberate physical gestures that delineate the phrase and signal a new entrance to promote this style of phrasing. Singing the phrase would also highlight implications regarding timing; certain phrases may need a little more space and breath to clarify the intent of the phrase. In mm. 50–55 (see Fig. 4.9), phrases occur in one-measure increments, and these increments form a dialogue with each other. Given the increased tempo in this section and flowing passagework, it is easy to run the phrases together and miss both the conversational nature of the section and structural definition. I suggest practicing this section without the passagework and focusing on the inflection of each new phrase and how each phrase should or should not relate to the preceding phrase. Once this is clear, the passagework should be added in a way that supports the phrasing. This instills important practice skills that will be crucial as students advance to more complicated repertoire.

As is typical of Bonis's music, countermelodies are present, and these require some thought as to the best tone to produce. Since the texture is relatively thin throughout, using a rich tone for the tenor countermelodies can easily overpower the melody and make what should be a light vocal piece too heavy. At the same time, the tenor does need to project and be heard. I have found that playing these melodies with the tips of my fingers and using less arm weight helps the

sound carry without becoming thick. One can also practice by removing the accompaniment patterns and playing just the melody and countermelody together, listening for a different sound and color in each voice. This also applies to the accompanimental figure if one chooses to make the top note of these figures into a melody. These top notes must be their own separate layer, neither blending with the melody or fitting into the sound of the accompaniment. The main melodies can have a wide range of coloristic effects; consider the surrounding harmonies and overall texture when making decisions about these. Mastering these types of sound layering is fundamental to successfully executing any of the pieces in *Femmes de Légende* and is best first practiced in the more simple *Desdémona*.

Aside from the octaves throughout the piece and a few fast arpeggios, two of the trickier technical passages occur in mm. 29–30 and mm. 85–86.

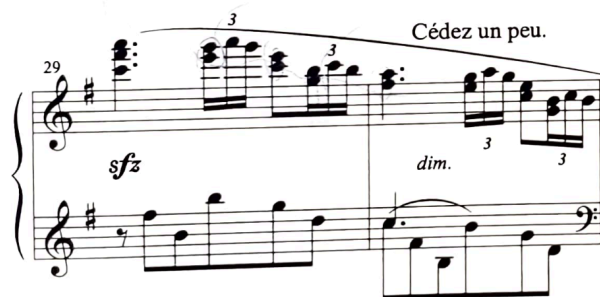


Figure 5.1 *Desdémona*, mm. 29–30



Figure 5.2 *Desdémona*, mm. 84–86

In mm. 29–30, the triplet figures are awkward, as they occur in the outer fingers of the hand. It can also be difficult to sustain the line given the leaps and the impossibility of creating a finger legato between these leaps. For the triplets, I have found regrouping to be a successful strategy. I think of the second note of the triplet as a new start and group that note with the last note of the triplet and the next third. This creates uniform direction—all notes moving downwards—which removes some of the awkwardness of thinking about the triplet as a little trill. I also use fingers 3-5-3 for each triplet figure, which prevents the sluggishness that can occur if finger 4 is used. I

also recommend practicing this passage by playing only the thirds and removing the rest of the triplet. Work to connect the sound of the thirds so that the illusion of a legato line can be created.

Hand crossings, voicing, and awkward figuration makes mm. 85–86 challenging.

Teachers can suggest several practice strategies, such as practicing this section playing only the melodic thirds and omitting the C's and concentrating on voicing the top notes and creating smooth, balanced physical motion between the thirds of each hand. Other options include playing only one voice at a time to eliminate any thumb tension and experimenting with the best hand and arm angle for the hand crossing so that speed and voicing are less difficult.

Phoebé

Phoebé is slightly more challenging than *Desdémona*. The large quantity of patterns and high degree of repetition make it somewhat easy to learn, but the technical finesse and control of quieter dynamics is difficult. The left hand's opening pattern (see Fig. 4.24) reoccurs throughout much of the piece and represents one of the technical demands of the piece. This moving figure must be seamless, with no accents or variations in attack, and executed at a pianissimo dynamic. To accomplish this, I suggest using finger 1 on the B-flat of measure two and on subsequent repetitions of this B-flat. This allows a crossing from finger 3 to finger 1, which is easier to play more smoothly than the other options. This also gives uniformity to the fingering—finger 1 is always on B-flat, which helps with memorization. In addition, I like to use very flat fingers and remain close to the keys for this passagework. Using little arm weight and keeping the arms light and buoyant also helps to achieve evenness and a soft, airy tone. This does not always come naturally to students and can be an excellent introduction to this technique before it is needed in more difficult Impressionistic pieces.

The soprano line in mm. 40–51 (see Fig. 4.28) presents another challenge in the execution of legato. The right hand is split between the melody in the outer portion of the hand and the accompaniment in the inner fingers. In addition, the melody does not always move stepwise. All of these factors make it difficult to create the impression of legato. Using a slower attack for the melodic notes can help avoid unwanted poking and accents in the melody. Precise rotation between the distance from the last note of each pattern to the next melodic note can facilitate control, and when combined with a relaxed hand, makes it easier to control the speed of the attack. This advanced approach to voicing and articulation will likely challenge students.

Aside from these technical considerations, *Phoebé* is an exercise in color variety, shading, and control and can thus serve to familiarize students with the Impressionistic style. The nuanced dynamic markings and experimentation required to achieve different tones for each marking is useful in developing students' aural imagination. There is no prescription for what tone or color each of these markings should have, only that each marking be distinctly different. Since the piece is meant to convey the dreams and impressions of the night and the moon, it is important to use dynamics to establish this idea of the night having many different colors and impressions, otherwise the repetition in the piece quickly becomes boring and fails to capture the impressionistic qualities of the music.

As discussed in chapter four, there is a spacious quality to the music that can also be brought out in performance. This can mainly be accomplished through thoughtful realization of rests and clear distinguishing of layers. The linear nature of both the left and right hand can make it easy to blend the layers, but it is more effective to keep the left hand quite subdued in the background and to give the right hand's melody a more focused sound. One should avoid over-phrasing the left hand or allowing it to push the tempo; it should be like a subconscious

murmur, constant and steady. Use the rests to allow the music to breathe; this also assists in hearing and introducing the next color change. Under the hands of students with a sensitive ear, this piece can be an effective introduction to the delicate side of Impressionism.

Mélisande

Mélisande is around the same difficulty as *Phoebé*; however, the speed of the arpeggios and the voicing and layering demands make it slightly more challenging, particularly for students who struggle with dexterity and finger independence. Managing the texture of constant thirty-second notes presents the greatest challenge. These notes generally fit well within the hand, but the ceaseless movement can draw unwanted attention to these accompanimental patterns. To compound the issue, the melody over the thirty-second notes is often comprised of long notes (quarter and half notes), making it even easier for the melody to disappear amidst the busy texture.

The abundance of flowing thirty-second notes provide a colorful opportunity for students to practice achieving perfectly effortless evenness in passagework. To accomplish this, it is best to keep the fingers on the keys and to avoid big gestures. Each finger should release after it plays, and the thumb especially should avoid holding any tension, as this causes unevenness in rhythm and sound. The wide stretch within each arpeggio can often lead students to hold tension in the hand, so teachers must be vigilant in helping students overcome this tendency. In addition, since the patterns fit the hand, it is unnecessary to use large rotations. Encourage students to know the exact distance between each note in the accompanimental pattern and to simply use the fingers and hand to reach the next note without using large arm gestures or overly stretching the hand.

Counterpoint throughout the piece represents a significant voicing and textural challenge. Much of the piece is written in three layers, with the right hand containing the main melody, left hand offering a countermelody, and the inner voices providing the accompaniment. It can be difficult to find a convincing balance between the melody and countermelody; the countermelody should be heard, as it adds color and interest, but it cannot overshadow the primary melody. Because of this, students can learn how to use the thirty-second notes to support, carry, and color the melodic line and create clear layers of sound. I suggest having students practice each texture separately and find a unique sound for each layer. For example, the accompaniment can be quite light and brushed. The main melody can have a deeper tone and be played with creative vocal timing. Finger substitutions can frequently be used in the melodic line as well to assist in achieving a true legato. In contrast, the left hand can have a lighter, less soloistic sound. Once these different sounds have been created for each layer, two layers can be practiced together at a time before all three layers are played together. Most essential is encouraging students to maintain an active ear and not conflate any of the layers in the inner ear.

This separation of layers by sound is important for the chorale that occurs from mm. 50–57 (see Fig. 4.3) as well. Special attention should be paid to the double stemmed bass notes as well as the soprano line. Within this hierarchy, one must practice hearing the color of the inner voices and the particular notes that give each chord its unique harmony. Students can practice this by singing a different line of the chorale each time the passage is played. This also assists in helping the inner ear hear and produce all the voices while still maintaining a hierarchy of voices.

The other main challenge of *Mélisande* lies in the regularity of the phrasing. Many of the phrases are in two-measure groups, which can make it easy to phrase in a way that is either too

predictable or fragmented. To guard against this, have students phrase past the downbeat of phrases, aiming instead for the second beat. This also serves to accentuate the syncopations in the melodic line.

Finally, one fingering suggestion: in mm. 46–48, it is difficult to achieve the accent on the C as well as evenness and a steady crescendo if the groupings are played as notated. I suggest using the right hand to play the accented C (first appearing in m. 46), using the left hand to play the following D, G-flat, A-flat, and C with fingers 5-3-2-1, and then using the right hand to play the remainder of the notes (D, G-flat, A-flat and B-flat) with fingers 1-2-3-5. This promotes evenness and makes a powerful crescendo much easier to execute.

Figure 5.3 *Mélisande*, mm. 45–46

Medium Pieces: *Viviane* and *Ophélie*

Viviane and *Ophélie* are of medium difficulty when considered within the context of Bonis’s collection but are overall most suitable for the moderately advanced student. Significant interpretational choices must be made in both pieces, with *Ophélie* requiring a particularly mature and sympathetic interpreter. More overt virtuosity is called for in these pieces than in the previously discussed pieces, and in many ways, the success of the overall effect of the music lies in the performer’s ability to effortlessly convey quick changes in character. In contrast to *Desdémona*, *Phoebé*, and *Mélisande*, greater voicing challenges emerge, as textures are generally thicker and melodies often appear embedded in chords.

Viviane

The sparkling texture and humor in *Viviane* make it a fun piece to play for students who excel in light, agile playing. The detailed and varied articulation markings are especially important in conveying the character of the piece and present an excellent opportunity for students to gain experience with such markings before working on more advanced impressionistic pieces, such as Debussy or Ravel's piano suites. Staccatos need to be sharp and clean, played on the fingertips with active fingers. These can pop out of the texture and contrast with the surrounding layers. The two-note slurs should contrast with the staccatos and be played with a strong sense of more-less in the sound. There are many tenuto markings, and I think of these as a gentle emphasis rather than a strong accent. A strong differentiation in attack and sound among all the different articulation markings is crucial to achieving the layers of sound that this piece requires.

Voicing is another challenge, given that there are almost always two melodies occurring concurrently. Students will have to decide which melody should be most prominent and how to play the less prominent melody in a way that is still heard. While accentuating the differences in articulation is essential in accomplishing these layers, thinking about the timing of these melodies and the tone/character of each melody is also helpful. For example, in the frequently occurring theme first presented in mm. 1–8 (see Fig. 4.18), the left hand functions as a melodic line, and the right hand has two characters—the two-note slurs and the eighth note interjections. One can experiment with playing the first four measures of the left hand more on the tips of the fingers to capture the energy of the piece, and then playing mm. 5–8 in a more lyrical way with the pads of the fingers. In the right hand, slightly delaying the onset of the two-note slur helps

distinguish these slurs as their own layer, and the eighth note interjections in mm. 5–7 can be played more sharply to contrast with the richness of the preceding slurs.

Especially tricky voicing passages occur in mm. 83–90 (see Fig. 4.21), mm. 101–113, and mm. 163–169 (see Fig. 4.23). These sections are a bit enigmatic; Bonis writes *en dehors* by the right hand, but the left hand is arguably more interesting in these passages. While different tones between the hands can aid in allowing both voices to be heard, it is also possible to allow the left hand to take over as the more prominent voice after the first four measures. The left hand in these places is already written in a more soloistic manner, and the melodic variation is interesting since the right hand is somewhat repetitive. Mm. 163–169 (see Fig. 4.23) is difficult due to the tenor and bass each having their own melody in addition to the soprano melody. Listening through the long lines in each melody is essential, as is breaking the left hand chords smoothly and unobtrusively. Also, as the bass melody pauses and the tenor plays (and then vice versa), try to end the concluding line in a tapered way and slightly accentuate the line that is beginning so that the new entrance is clear. This helps bring out the dialogue and avoids conflating the textures.

As noted in chapter four, there are many vocal elements in this piece, and it is essential to consider how breath can impact phrasing and layering. Often, melodies begin after rests; these rests impact the timing of entrances. Examples of this include m. 26 and the left hand of m. 85 and m. 87 (see Fig. 4.20–4.21), among others. Slightly delaying or placing these melodic entrances helps create the illusion of someone breathing into the phrase, which is both stylistically appropriate and useful in separating out the textures and layers. Throughout the piece, be especially vigilant of rests and consider how these can contribute to creative timing and silence that clarifies phrasing and voicing.

Pedaling deserves consideration, as the slightest bit of over-pedaling destroys the sparkliness of the texture and muddies the many melodies. In the opening, I like to lift the pedal on beat three of the first measure. Measure two can be played with finger legato, and this avoids blurring the two-note slur. In m. 5, I lift the pedal on the third beat again and largely use finger legato after that until measure eight. In general, try to start a new pedal on the two-note slurs and always keep a close ear on whatever melodic line is moving the most. Pedaling should maintain the cleanliness of these moving notes. Mm. 74–78 is unfortunately awkward for pedaling. As much as possible, try to avoid sustaining the left hand notes, as doing this makes the music sound heavy. Utilize finger legato between the right hand octaves and dabs of pedal to connect what the fingers cannot connect.



Figure 5.4 *Viviane*, mm. 74–78



Figure 5.5 *Viviane*, mm. 13–16

Finally, the triplet figure that occurs in m. 15 and throughout the piece is not easy but can be solved by regrouping the figure mentally. I think of the second note in the triplet group as a new beginning and add the rest of the triplet plus the next downbeat to that grouping. This creates a uniform direction and smooths out some of the awkwardness of the turn in the triplet figure. This should also be practiced without the turn, playing only beats one, two, and three without the rest of the triplet in order to hear and preserve the melodic outline.

Ophélie

While *Ophélie* presents challenges in playing fast passagework and layering sounds and textures, its main difficulty lies more in interpretation rather than technique. The writing is quite

idiomatic and even the fastest passages fit the hand well. Creating a sense of structure that balances the programmatic demands with some semblance of coherence is not as intuitive. As addressed in chapter four, Ophélie's descent into madness is depicted through the music's sudden, unexpected changes of melody, texture, and harmony. These changes can leave the music sounding fragmented, disorganized, and nonsensical if the performance is not carefully planned. While the music's sense of madness is important to display as it is a key connection with the programmatic, the performer can make choices that provide a framework which helps to hold the insanity together.

The opening (mm. 1–8, see Fig. 4.12–4.13) offers an example of this. The first three measures have no slur markings, and mm. 4–9 have no long phrase markings—each beat is its own slur. In addition, the chords in the first three measures are not a functionally tonal progression. Between the lack of phrase markings and the unusual harmonies, this opening can sound disconnected and confusing. Here are a couple of strategies that can be used to help students create coherence while maintaining the programmatic elements: first, in mm. 1–3, timing of the rolled chords and left hand notes is important. One can experiment with the speed of each rolled chord, perhaps rolling the first few chords more slowly and rolling the succeeding chords gradually faster. One can also think about the inflection of the different harmonies. The D7 chord could be inflected more as a question, with the B diminished seventh chord being inflected more as an answer. In addition, consider the timing of the left hand. A strictly metronomic rendition of this section conflates the layers and can quickly become boring. I recommend placing the left hand notes, using this timing and a shorter articulation to create a distinctly different sound and layer from the right hand. In mm. 4–9, try to keep these broken figurations as part of one phrase and avoid phrasing by measure.

Throughout the piece, melody serves as connective tissue and offers a method of connecting the disparate musical elements. Because of this, voicing and phrasing are perhaps the most important performance considerations. In passages with textures such as mm. 9–12 (see Fig. 4.13), try to avoid contouring the inner accompanimental patterns. These inner voices should be quiet and flowing. The same is true of mm. 26–28 (see Fig. 4.15); the right hand accompaniment needs to avoid big swells so that the left hand melody can shine. In m. 34 and mm. 39–40 (see Fig. 4.16), a nice countermelody is inserted into the alto voice, which I like to bring out. A duet emerges in mm. 57–65 (see Fig. 5.6). The tenor section of the duet is difficult to sustain given that the hand must play the low bass note before returning to continue the melody. Practice playing this without the low bass notes to achieve the desired phrasing, and then add the bass notes back in, being careful to continue listening to the melody.

The image shows a musical score for the piece *Ophélie*, measures 57 through 65. The score is written for piano and is in 4/4 time. It features a duet between the right and left hands. The right hand has a melodic line with a 'lontain' marking, and the left hand has a more rhythmic accompaniment. The piece concludes with a 'Tempo I' marking and a 'ff' dynamic.

Figure 5.6 *Ophélie*, mm. 57–65

The melodic lines throughout the piece also dictate phrasing, tempo, and pacing. The entrances of melodies, such as in mm. 13, 23, 32 (see Fig. 4.14–4.15), should be clearly defined

so that the sharp changes in texture are emphasized. Failing to clearly display new entrances can make the piece sound like a long stream-of-consciousness story, whereas clearly showing each melody and the changes between melodies better displays the unpredictable nature of the piece and the wildness of the mood changes. Options for accomplishing this include placing the beginnings of phrases, sharp and clean pedal changes, and radically changing the color and sound of each new melody. Many different expressive markings such as *tranquille* and *calmato* are given which impact tempo. While there is a great deal of interpretive freedom in how to achieve these effects, I have found it most effective to use the direction of the melody as a guide. Even within the melodies marked *tranquille*, there is freedom to both move the tempo forward in the middle of the phrase and relax it towards the end of the phrase. These are the kinds of interpretive decisions one must make to enhance the wildness of the music and ensure the integrity of the musical structure. Because of the difficulty of interpretation and relative lack of technical challenges, *Ophélie* fills a unique place in the teaching repertoire by allowing students to play a musically complicated and fulfilling Impressionist piece before they are ready to play the most advanced Impressionist repertoire.

Advanced Pieces: *Salomé* and *Omphale*

Salomé and *Omphale* are the most technically and musically challenging pieces of *Femmes de Légende* and are only suitable for advanced pianists. Virtuoso passagework abounds, along with repeated notes, fast octaves, hand-crossings, and tricky hand stretches. Some of the interpretative decisions are less than intuitive, and the overall writing does not feel quite as pianistic as the pieces previously discussed. While these pieces are more approachable than Ravel's *Miroirs* and *Gaspard de la nuit* or Debussy's most advanced pieces, they are also quite challenging and should not be underestimated.

Salomé

Salomé is the second most difficult piece of the set, second only to *Omphale*. The technical demands are considerable, involving virtuosic passagework, fast octaves, and repeated notes. The most notable instances of virtuosic passagework occur in mm. 13–18 (see Fig. 5.7) and mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.34). Both of these sections require a similar physical approach. Students should work to keep the hand as loose as possible and release each finger after it plays. Even though the contour frequently changes direction, the hand needs to remain balanced over each note and the wrist and arm should not pull too far in the direction of the melodic line. This will result in a loss of accuracy. Much of this passagework requires the use of the outer section of the hand, so whenever possible, I prefer to use fingers 3 and 5 rather than fingers 3-4-5, as the involvement of the fourth finger sometimes hampers speed, evenness, and strength. In m. 14, one can consider using the left hand to play the B-flat on the second beat instead of the fourth finger of the right hand. I find it easier to produce the crescendo and staccato ping of this note with the left hand, but the right hand may also be used.



Figure 5.7 *Salomé*, mm. 13–18

Octave passagework occurs in mm. 36–38 and mm. 89–100 (see Fig. 4.32). Given the similarities of this section to Liszt's *Mephisto Waltz No. 1*, *Salomé* would be an excellent piece for students aspiring to play the Liszt. There are a couple of ways to practice these octaves. First,

it is important to practice releasing and moving the left hand quickly. Any prolonged holding of the left hand chords will prevent the right hand octaves from sounding. I like to play these chords on the edge of the keys so that it is easier to release off the edge of the keys. Second, practice the right hand alone, but add an octave where the left hand would usually play. This helps to build technical fluidity and a continuous sound. You can also practice building continuity by playing only the thumbs of both hands and listening for how both hands create one line together. Also, keep the right arm constantly moving and avoid resting the arm in the keys of the second octave of each group of octaves. This fragments the line and prevents the music from sounding cohesive and powerful.

Repeated notes in m. 39 and mm. 101–108 represent the other main technical challenge in *Salomé*. Again, it is most important to release the left hand quickly so that the repeated notes are able to sound. It is also helpful to play the repeated notes on the tips of the fingers and to keep the weight of the hand balanced forward, towards the piano. I have found that fingering these repeated notes with either 4-3-2-1 or 3-2-1-2 works best. In either case, be sure to only play quintuplets, as the natural instinct is to play sextuplets.

Figure 5.8, *Salomé*, mm. 99–108

Aside from technical considerations, capturing Salomé's bold character is the other great challenge. This requires a fearless spirit and fierce commitment to the detailed score markings. Articulation plays an important role in this quest. Bonis is careful to distinguish between staccato, staccatissimo, tenuto, and legato slurs, and these distinctions correlate with the different facets of Salomé's personality. For example, the staccatissimo of the left hand in the opening of the piece conveys energy and vitality, so these notes must be quite sharp and spring-y. However, the long slur and legato in mm. 15–18 (see Fig. 5.7) should be noteworthy in its sharp contrast to the spikiness of the opening (see Fig. 4.29). The slightest bit of similarity in articulation between these two passages will fail to communicate Salomé's wildness, and this is true throughout the piece.

The same holds true for tempo markings. *Pressez* and *serrez* appear frequently throughout the piece, as do the markings of *sans rigueur* and *cédez*. I believe these are not only tempo markings but also character indications, and the performer should decide how tempo can be used to underscore the unpredictability of Salomé. In general, one can really push the tempo in sections marked with *pressez* and other such acceleration markings. The music itself is already written in a way that makes pushing the tempo feel natural, and one has to verge on the edge of out of control to convey that aspect of Salomé's personality. Conversely, the sections that are marked with slower tempos require patience. One must use time and flexibility to show the languorous and seductive qualities of the music, which of course correlates to some of Salomé's key traits. I recommend experimenting with rubato and the colors of harmonies to further distinguish the atmospheric nature of these sections from the aggressive sections.

Finally, when making these interpretative decisions, it is helpful to consult Bonis's orchestral transcription of the piece. The orchestral version offers insight that can shape one's

melodic tone, color, and inflection. Notable examples of this include the oboe solos that occur in mm. 30–35 (see Fig. 4.34), mm. 77–79 (see Fig. 4.35), and mm. 85–87, the flute solo from mm. 15–18, and the use of strings and harp in passages such as mm. 124–136. These orchestral reference points are useful in imagining color and the broader musical picture that Bonis envisioned. Overall, *Salomé* will appeal to charismatic, imaginative students who enjoy playing virtuosic pieces.

Omphale

Omphale is the most technically and musically challenging piece of the set. There is fast passagework (which is not always comfortable for the hands) and awkward hand crossings, in addition to enigmatic musical material that can be a challenge to interpret convincingly. Much of the fast passagework is set within a *mezzoforte* or quieter dynamic and should be played lightly but with legato, as in mm. 22–29 (see Fig. 5.9). These types of passages also involve a number of accidentals, which are not so intuitive for the hands. The combination of these features makes *Omphale* an effective choice for students wishing to improve their choreography, agility, and flexibility skills.

To navigate the awkward passagework, I have found it best to practice these passages with fingers very close to the keys. Students can practice keeping the hand fully relaxed, as any tension will interfere with the desired evenness and dynamic control. Also, be aware of the exact distance between each note. Intervals frequently change between half-steps, whole-steps, and larger intervals, and the small changes in the patterns make it easy to miss notes. Being mindful of which sections are chromatic and which patterns mix intervals helps the hand more accurately navigate these passages. Practicing in rhythm groups can also drill accuracy and evenness.



Figure 5.9 *Omphale*, mm. 20–26

Many of these fast passages also involve hand crossings. While Bonis’s indicated crossings are idiomatic and I recommend following her suggestions, the speed of the passages can still make these crossings feel awkward. An example of this occurs in mm. 9–11 (see Fig. 4.40). The hands cross every other beat, which also adds to the complexity of the choreography. I recommend practicing just the top notes first to develop the basic choreography of crossing hands. Then, practice only the lower voices, leaving out the top melody. This pattern fits together smoothly and anchors the other hand crossings. Upon playing the passage as written, be sure to keep the arms free and to use circular arm gestures to maximize mobility and avoid collisions between the hands. This is especially important in mm. 15–16 (see Fig. 4.41), where the left hand plays high in the treble over the right hand. Maintaining space between the arms and torso allows for better control of the sound and makes it easier to maneuver around the keyboard despite the less than ergonomic position.

In passages such as mm. 33–35 and mm. 49–51 (see Fig. 4.43), remember to keep both arms moving at all times. In order to make these hand crossings in time without unwanted accents, one must always be preparing for the next crossing ahead of time. Finally, m. 89 is the

one place where I do recommend breaking the passage differently than Bonis suggests. In the second beat, I take the first three notes with the left hand as written, but take the last three notes of this beat with the right hand. This allows the left hand to take the first four notes of the third beat and the right hand to take the last four notes of the third beat, giving the left hand more time to position itself in m. 90.

Figure 5.10 *Omphale* mm. 88–89

The triplets in mm. 30–32 (see Fig. 4.42) and mm. 71–78 are somewhat awkward, musically and technically. Musically, one should listen to the accented notes—these form the melody. Practice playing just these notes and shaping the line. When practicing the whole figure, keep the arm and sound light and avoid emphasizing the unaccented notes in the group. In some of these triplets, the left hand can play the accented note, which helps with voicing. When it is not practical for the left hand to play the accented note, I use fingers 1-3-2 on each of these triplets, which creates a natural accent on the first note and decrescendo on the other two notes.

Mm. 52–55 is quite challenging; when first starting the piece, learn these measures first (see Fig. 5.11). The top voice must project the most, but the bass line has an interesting counter melody, as does the tenor. To further complicate the passage, each of these voices has a different articulation. Realizing these differences in articulation between the three voices while balancing the hierarchy of voices and keeping the accompaniment quietly flowing between the hands requires a clear aural image of the desired effect and excellent coordination. To practice this,

begin by isolating each of the three melodies and playing them alone with clear shaping and articulation. Also practice just the non-melodic accompaniment alone, concentrating on keeping it legato and pianissimo. Then concentrate on the left hand and shaping the tenor and bass together. Find different finger weights for the tenor and bass—this will help prevent the tenor from blending into the accompaniment. In addition, try singing each of the lines while playing other lines. Most of all, play the soprano line with a slow but deep attack—it is most essential that this line carry the phrase.

Figure 5.11 *Omphale*, mm. 52–55

Finally, a few thoughts on using the melody to hold the structure of the piece together: the highly linear nature of the melody and its tight motivic construction can make the piece sound like a long run-on sentence. To combat this, it is helpful to have students first map out every instance of the melody early in the learning process. This can then be used to guide decisions regarding phrasing, tempo, and direction. In many sections, it helps to place the beginnings of phrases to indicate the syntax and significant structural points. Consider also the implications of register. Fast transitions between various registers occurs frequently; these are great opportunities to show the differences in color and sound between each register. With clear direction and sensitive listening, *Omphale* can be a kaleidoscope of color and shapes and a rewarding opportunity to improve technique.

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