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Characteristics of Style in the Song Cycle Don Quichotte à Dulcinée

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CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLE IN THE SONG CYCLE DON QUICHOTTE À DULCINÉE

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Master of Arts in Music

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by

Bruce Gyger Dodge

July 1970

An integral part of this thesis (covering paper) is a tape recording of a graduate recital performed on July 22, 1970, as part of the requirements for the completion of the thesis.

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presents in

Graduate Recital

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PROGRAM

I

Sonetto spirituale: Maddalena alla Croce ..... Frescobaldi

II

Der Wanderer ..... Schubert
Die Wetterfahne

Verborgenheit ..... Wolf
Fussreise

III

Naught that Country Needeth ..... Ives
The Innate

Four Songs:
Duty
Vita
"1, 2, 3"
Luck and Work
General William Booth Enters Heaven

IV

Don Quichotte a Dulcinee ..... Ravel
Chanson Romanesque
Chanson Epique
Chanson a Boire

HERTZ RECITAL HALL
July 22, 1970
8:15 P.M.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Obviously the accomplished singer must be familiar with vocal literature written in all important languages. French music from its very inception "finds itself imbued with a verbal element with an intellectualism following the word, the instrument of decisive language" (13:216). This is a fundamental characteristic of French music which provides a challenge for a singer of another nationality.

I. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

As Don Quichotte à Dulcinée is representative of contemporary vocal literature, an investigation into its style characteristics would seem to have value. Through the performance of the song cycle this writer has come to appreciate and recognize that an understanding of French and the style characteristics of this composer are necessary for an artistic rendition.

II. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to an investigation of the song cycle, Don Quichotte à Dulcinée, although some background discussion is made of his other vocal music.

III. PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY

This writer examined the (1) biography and vocal music of the composer and (2) stylistic elements of the cycle. For purposes of brevity, hereafter, the songs in this cycle are referred to as: Chanson Romanesque, the first song, or Number I; Chanson Épique, the second song, or Number II; and Chanson à Boire, the third song, or Number III.

IV. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Cantabile. The word "cantabile" means "singable," with the melody smoothly sung and emphasized (1:114).

Recitative. A vocal style imitating and emphasizing the natural inflection of speech. It is the declamatory portion of a vocal composition as opposed to the lyrical (1:629).

Song cycle. A series of songs relating to the poetic subject and forming a single musical composition (1:700).

Strophic. A song form in which all the stanzas of the text are sung to the same music (1:713).

CHAPTER II

BIOGRAPHY AND VOCAL MUSIC

According to most sources Maurice Ravel cannot be considered an innovator. Ravel believed that in order to become a composer, "One submitted to rigorous academic training and began by imitating good models" (18:126). As a result of this conviction Ravel used the forms and techniques of other composers, but shaped them to fit his style.

I. BIOGRAPHY

Maurice Ravel was born March 7, 1875, in Cibourene, in the Basque region of France. His mother was Basque and his father was Swiss.

> It was the typical dance rhythms of Andalusia and even the Italianized melodies of the nineteenth century zarzuelas sung to him by his mother from which Ravel as a child gained his first impressions of a Spain which later he was to employ in so masterly a fashion in the Rapsodies, in Bolero, and in his brilliant one act opera L'Heure Espagnole . . . (16:37).

When he was three months old the family moved to Paris where, at the age of seven, he studied piano with Henri Ghys. Coming from a very cultural and artistic background, his interest in music was encouraged (16:14). At the age of eleven Ravel studied harmony with Charles

Rene and in 1889, entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he remained for fifteen years. While at the Conservatoire Ravel's compositions were marked by his own individual style, and he was known in official circles at the Conservatoire as a revolutionist. At the Conservatoire Ravel met Ricardo Vines, who became a life-long friend and was a great influence on Ravel. Vines and his brother Pepito, a dancer, often performed Spanish music for Ravel. Later it was Vines who presented Ravel's piano compositions to the public and was a major interpreter of Ravel's music. It was also Vines who directed Ravel to the poets Mallarme, Henri de Regner, and Baudelaire, from whose works Ravel drew the texts for many of his songs (18:61). While at the Conservatoire, in 1891, both Ravel and Vines met the composer Chabrier. The influence of Chabrier resulted in Ravel's radical use of the seventh chord in such works as Histoires Naturelles (1906) (16:108). Somewhat later, on his meeting Erik Satie, he became fascinated with the Sarabandes. Satie's influence on Ravel is illustrated in his use of modal harmonies in such songs as Sainte (16:108).

In his studies at the Conservatoire Ravel was primarily concerned with developing his compositional technique.

> Technique was what interested him, then as always; he was particularly delighted with a remark made by Massenet at one of his lectures on composition to the effect that in order to know your technique you must learn the technique of other people (16:27).

Further evidence of his compositional technique was reflected in his studies with Fauré and may be seen in his use of modal harmonies and transitions to distant keys without obscuring the basic tonal center (16:107). Although his first work was published in 1895, none of his compositions were performed until 1898. With his composition Jeaux D'eau (1901), Ravel anticipated the extension of piano technique found in Debussy's Estampes. In Jeaux D'eau, Ravel exploited the upper registers of the piano, introduced new sonorities such as shimmering glissandos, obscure harmonies, and rustling arpeggios, and in effect continued and extended the technical experiments of Liszt, but with impressionistic harmonies (22:583). Manuel Roland, commenting on the effect of Jeaux D'eau, said, "From Jeaux D'eau there rapidly emerged a new piano technique which made Ravel's contemporaries acknowledge themselves his debtors" (15:31).

During his stay at the Conservatoire, Ravel attempted to win the Prix de Rome four times, but was unsuccessful. On his fourth attempt he was excluded from the competition even before the preliminary judging. Because of his reputation as a major French composer, Ravel's exclusion resulted in "L'affair Ravel," which shook the foundations of the Conservatoire and caused Gabriel Fauré's appointment to the directorship.

After leaving the Conservatoire Ravel led a

Bohemian existence, joining a group of painters, poets, critics, and composers called the Apaches. Their purpose was to promote contemporary ideas through the discussion of paintings, the declamation of poetry, and the performance of new music. Some of the Apaches, such as the poets Klingsor and Fargue, directly influenced Ravel by providing him with the texts to his song cycle Sheherezade and the song Rêves. Encouraged by the Apaches and stimulated by his environment, Ravel composed profusely for the next ten years. During this period his important works were: Miroirs Sonatine (1905) for the piano; Valses Nobles et Sentimentales (1911) for voice and piano; Histoires Naturelles (1906) for orchestra; Rapsodie Espagnole (1907) for the theater; and his most famous ballet, Daphnis and Chloe (1909-1912).

After war erupted in 1914, Ravel tried to enlist but was rejected because of his small stature. Finally, he was accepted into the ambulance corps where he became ill and was sent home to recover. With the death of his mother (1917), Ravel went into seclusion and was not inspired to write until he bought a country retreat (1921), where he wrote two major works for violin, Tzigane (1924) and Sonata for Violin and Piano (1927).

In 1928 Ravel toured America and Canada for four months as a conductor and pianist. Upon his return to France he wrote Bolero (1928), which, although one of his

lesser compositions, has been associated all over the world with his name. Ravel's attitude toward Bolero is shown when he said:

> I am particularly desirous that there should be no misunderstanding about this work. It constitutes an experiment in a limited direction and should not be suspected of aiming at achieving anything other or no more than what it actually does (10:4).

During this same year Ravel received an honorary Doctor of Music from Oxford University (1928).

By 1934 Ravel had begun to experience muscular difficulties; in 1937 he was operated on for a brain disorder and died nine days later. Commenting on the effect of his death, one critic said:

> With Maurice Ravel's death has disappeared the greatest French composer of our age. Since the deaths of Gabriel Fauré and Claude Debussy, it was in his hands that the torch of our national art was kept alight . . . He dominated from afar all the musicians of his time (10:9).

II. VOCAL MUSIC

Although Ravel was not a prolific song writer, having produced only seventeen songs, one mixed chorus work, and two operas, most authorities agree that his works are important in French vocal literature. Concerning his feeling toward vocal music, Ravel once said, "The human voice is the most expressive of sonorous instruments" (18:151). His contribution to vocal music was small in quantity but distinguished in quality (18:158).

Ravel's first published song Sainte (1896), was set to a text by the poet Stéphane Mallarmé. In this work the influence of Satie may be seen in Ravel's unusual treatment of harmony. With the publishing of Deux Epigrammes (1898), Ravel's individual style with its clarity, conciseness, unusual harmonic patterns and subtle melodies was clearly established. Sheherazade (1904), a setting of three poems by a fellow Apache, Klingsor, illustrates the vocal lines' function to interpret the words while the accompaniment provides movement. At this time Ravel was experimenting with adapting music to speech through the use of inflections and accents, heightening them and changing them into melody (16:119). This experiment continued later with his treatment of the text in Histoires Naturelles (1906), causing a second "L'affair Ravel" when the singers sang the last "e's" in a conversational style without giving them musical value.

Ravel's vocal style changed with his setting of Mallarmé's Trois Poems (1913). Under the influence of Schöenberg's Pierrot Lunaire, Ravel's vocal line was more sustained and less declamatory than in his previous works, now depending on the accompaniment for change of color. In the second song Ravel treated the voice like part of the instrumental ensemble, its translucent texture and dissonant harmonies suggesting the style of Pierrot Lunaire (11:139).

Ravel composed only one work for mixed chorus, Trois Chansons (1916). Although the text of this choral work is written in the style of the sixteenth-century madrigalists, Ravel's setting is contemporary, through the use of modality, a touch of irony, and bold harmonies.

With the publication of his Chansons Madecasses (1926), Ravel reached a new height of simplicity in his use of instrumentation. Commenting on this work he said:

> The Chansons Madecasses seem to me to introduce a new dramatic indeed even an erotic element through the subject of Parny's verses. It is sort of a quartet in which the singing voice plays the role of the principal instrument. Simplicity reigns. . . (21:202).

With this work Ravel treated the voice like an instrument, and the intermixing of the colors of the flute, violin, cello, piano, and voice show Ravel's knowledge of instrumental timbre. Furthermore, Ravel's constant striving for simplicity was exhibited by his ability to achieve form from a minimum number of rhythmic and melodic themes. In contrast, the second song has a complicated bitonal structure. The setting of the third song, a pastoral piece, uses the instruments in a sparse harmonic texture using major ninths to support a lyrical melody. "Altogether the tryptych of the Chansons Madecasses must be reckoned as one of Ravel's most original contributions to the music of his time" (16:149).

After the sparse texture of the Chansons Madecasses, Ravel returned to a fuller musical texture with his song

cycle, Don Quichotte à Dulcinée. He originally wrote the cycle for a movie about the legendary hero Don Quixote, but his music was rejected by the movie company. The cycle was first performed December 1, 1934, by Martial Singher. Singher performed the cycle frequently, and it received much acclamation by the public and the critics (18:204). As Ravel's final composition, this cycle was a fitting farewell to the fanciful world which influenced his many songs.

CHAPTER III

CHARACTERISTICS OF STYLE IN DON QUICHOTTE À DULCINÉE

For many years Ravel seriously considered studying Spanish in order to read Don Quixote in the original, so that he could write his own libretto of it (18:253). Neither the Spanish studies nor the libretto ever materialized, but his interest in Cervantes continued unabated. Many years later, abandoning his original project, the composer set three poems by Morand. This poet was familiar with Spain through his extensive travels, and each poem, with its specific dance rhythm, had the Spanish atmosphere. Commenting on Ravel's settings, Orenstein says:

> The colorful rhythms of Spanish music are intimately linked to the dance. It is perhaps not then surprising that in addition to being influenced by Spanish music Ravel was deeply receptive to dance rhythms (18:10).

I. THE TEXT

This song cycle is based on the legendary character of the Cervantes novel. Don Quixote imagines he is a knight living in an imaginary world where windmills are dragons and a whore named Aldonza is the beautiful maiden Dulcinée. The first song, Chanson Romanesque, describes the wonderful

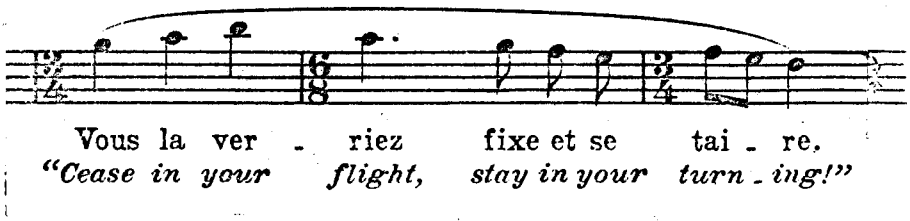
tasks he will do for his love Dulcinée. The second song, Chanson Épique, is a prayer to the Saints to help him achieve this task. The third song, Chanson à Boire, is a wild drinking song in which Quixote decides life is better than this fickle girl.

Each song, extremely expressive, is heightened by the musical setting. In choosing specific texts Ravel believed:

> Setting a text to music implied creating a new work of art, and if a word or phrase disturbed him it could be changed as long as the poetic beauty and general sense of the word was not jeopardized in any way (18:56).

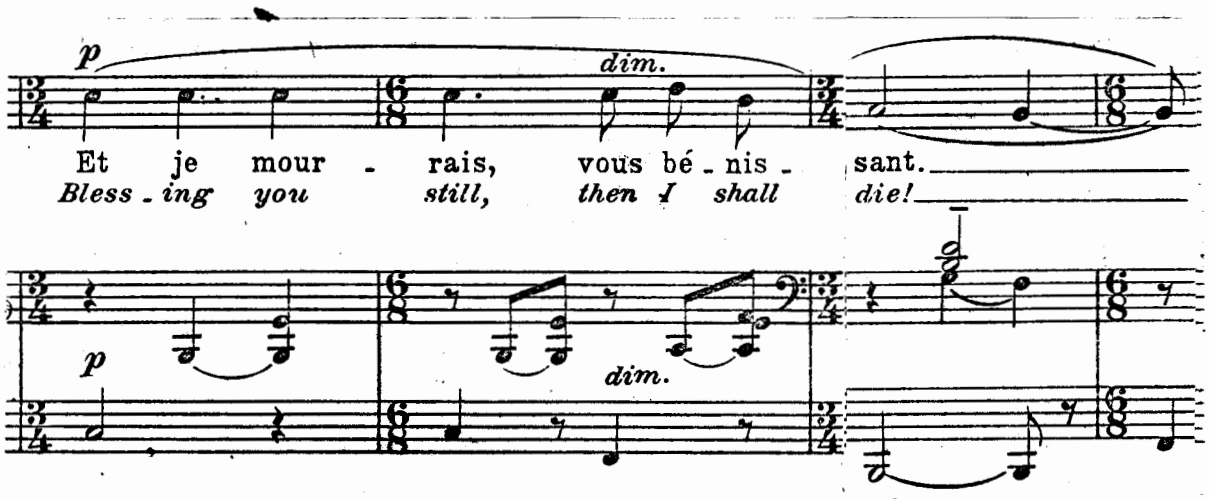
The text of the first song describes Don Quixote's affection for his mistress Dulcinée. To gain her affection Don Quixote would attempt many tasks involving halting the revolution of the earth, and removing the stars from the heavens. Throughout the cycle the wedding between the words and the vocal line is remarkable and is illustrated in the first song in measures nine-ten, with the text "Vous la verriez," where the melody moves up diatonically, hesitates, then quickly moves on.

Example 1. Chanson Romanesque, measures 9-11.



After an instrumental interlude of seven measures, Don Quixote says that if Dulcinée is frightened of the dark sky, he will put the stars back again. Ravel has set this part in B-flat major and in a less animated style than the beginning. After a two-measure interlude the text concludes, as Don Quixote declares that if Dulcinée does not believe he is devoted to her, then he would shamefully die blessing her name. In this last section Ravel uses a sparse accompaniment, subdued dynamics, and recitative-like melody, achieving the feeling of the sacrifice of Don Quixote for his mistress.

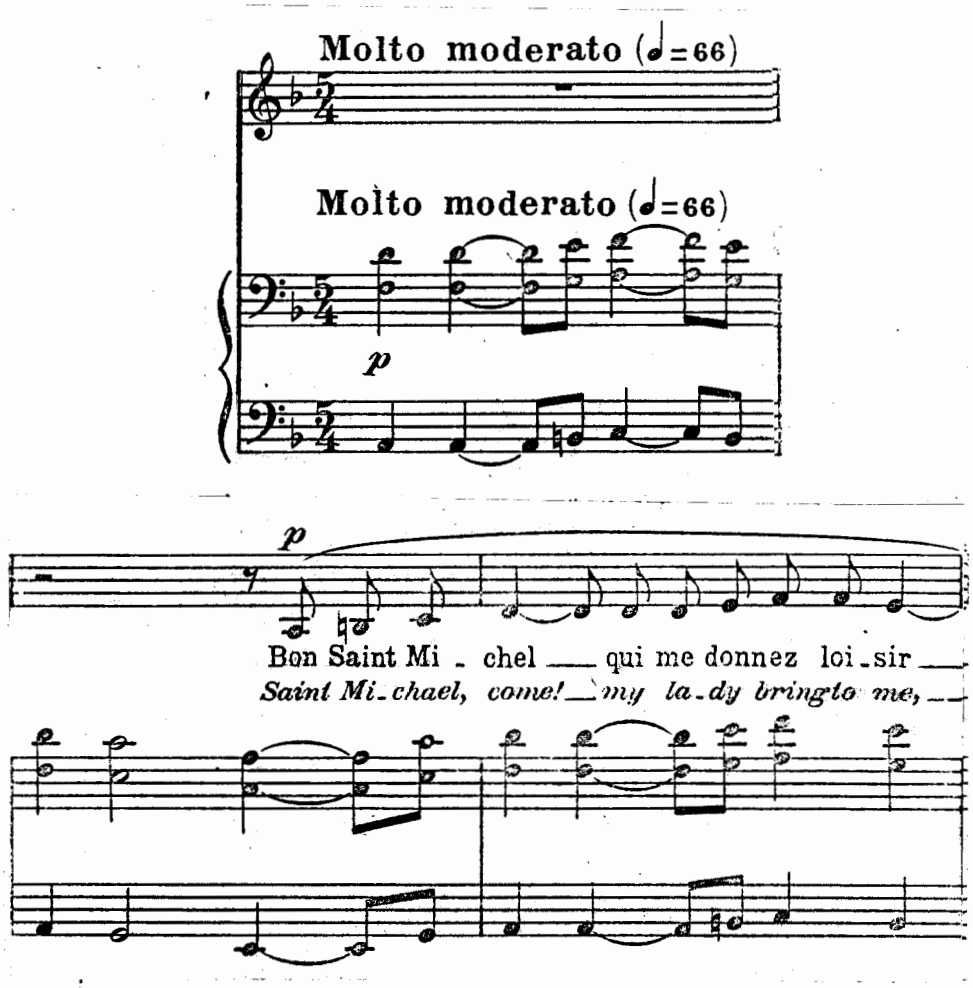
Example 2. Chanson Romanesque, measures 57-60.



The text of the second song is in the form of a prayer. Before the altar of the Madonna, whom he thinks his mistress resembles, Don Quixote prays to Saint George and Saint Michael to bless his sword. Through his use of

modal melody moving in a conjunct line, low register in the voice, and a slow tempo, Ravel achieves this mood of prayer.

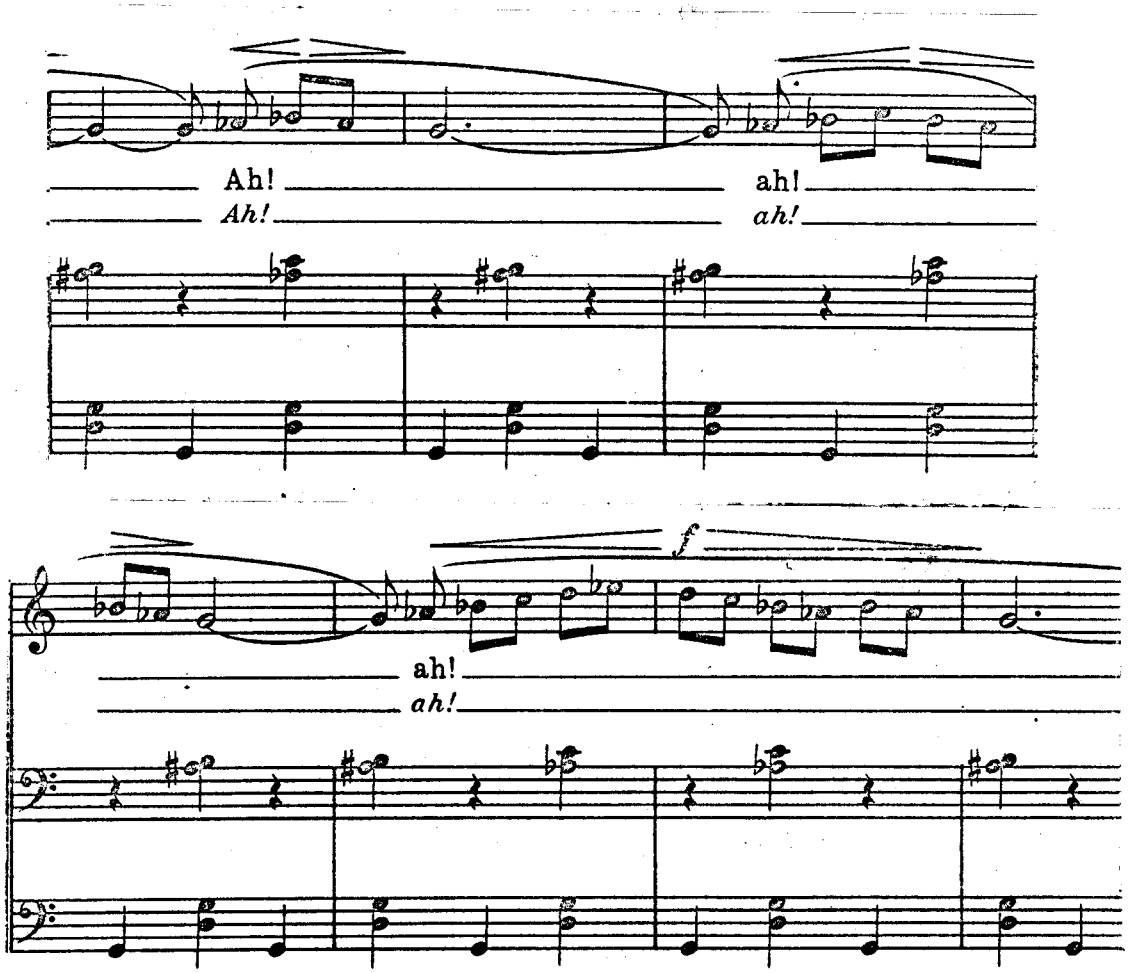
Example 3. Chanson Épique, measures 1-3.



In contrast to this prayerful mood, in the third song Don Quixote wonders why he should be said for love when good wine is available. Throughout the first part,

to give the feeling of this drinking song, Ravel used the word "ah" in an undulating line for eight measures.

Example 4. Chanson à Boire, measures 23-29.



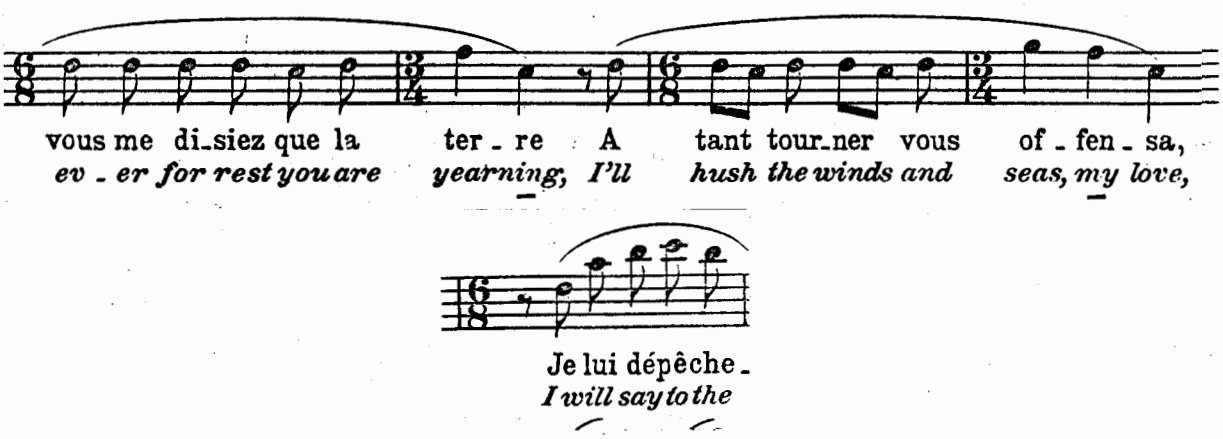
After an interlude of descending major and minor chords, Don Quixote concludes in an ironic way, wondering why he should praise a maiden who frowns on drinking; he should instead drink to joy. The dramatic style and the

spirited accompaniment make a perfect setting for this rousing text.

II. MELODY

Most melodies in this song cycle seem to enhance the text; they are tuneful and cantabile, employing a range that does not exceed an octave. As in other of Ravel's vocal works, they alternate smoothly between a recitative and cantabile style. The first song, beginning with recitative in measures 5-9, moves to a more cantabile style beginning with measure 9.

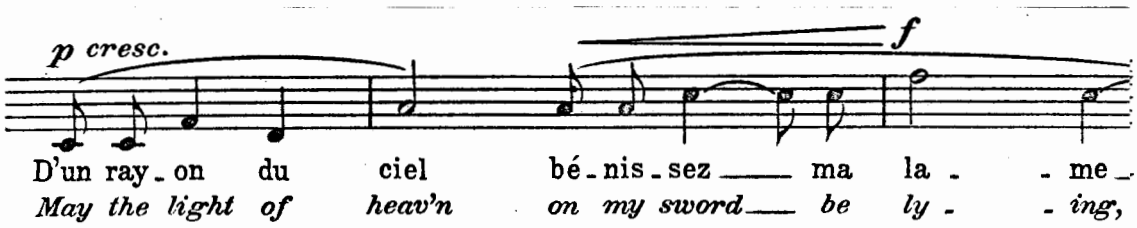
Example 5. Chanson Romanesque, measures 5-9.



Recitative is employed at the beginning of the second song; then, moving in a conjunct undulating line,

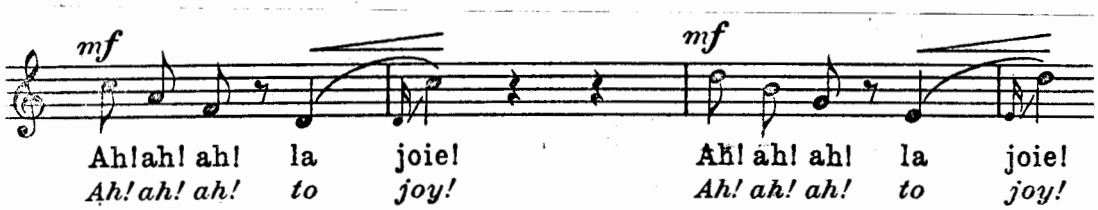
it becomes more disjunct with the text "D'un ray-on du ciel benissez ma lame," in measures 15-17.

Example 6. Chanson Épique, measures 15-17.



On the other hand, the third song is characterized by its completely disjunct motion.

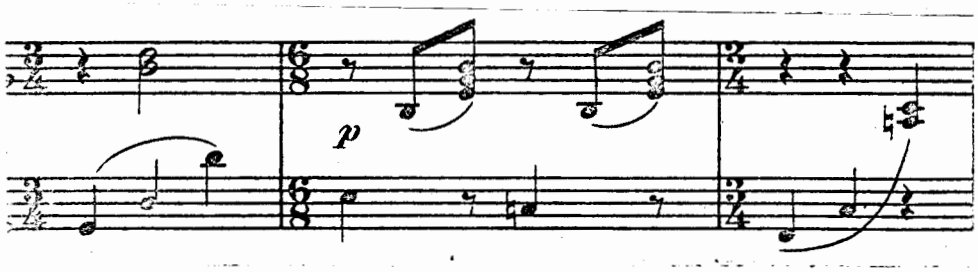
Example 7. Chanson à Boire, measures 43-46.



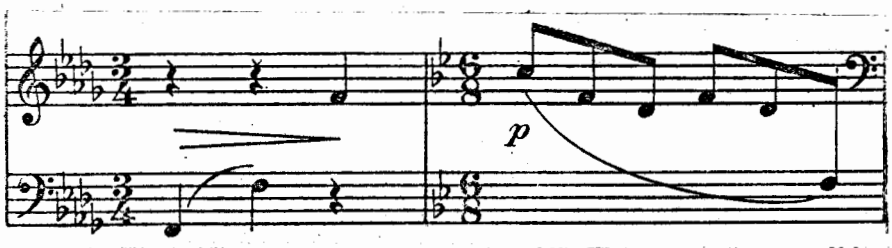
III. HARMONY

The harmonic structure in this cycle is quite conventional. Number I starts in B-flat minor, modulating at measure 26 to the V chord of the new key B-flat major at measure 34.

Example 8. Chanson Romanesque, measures 24-26.

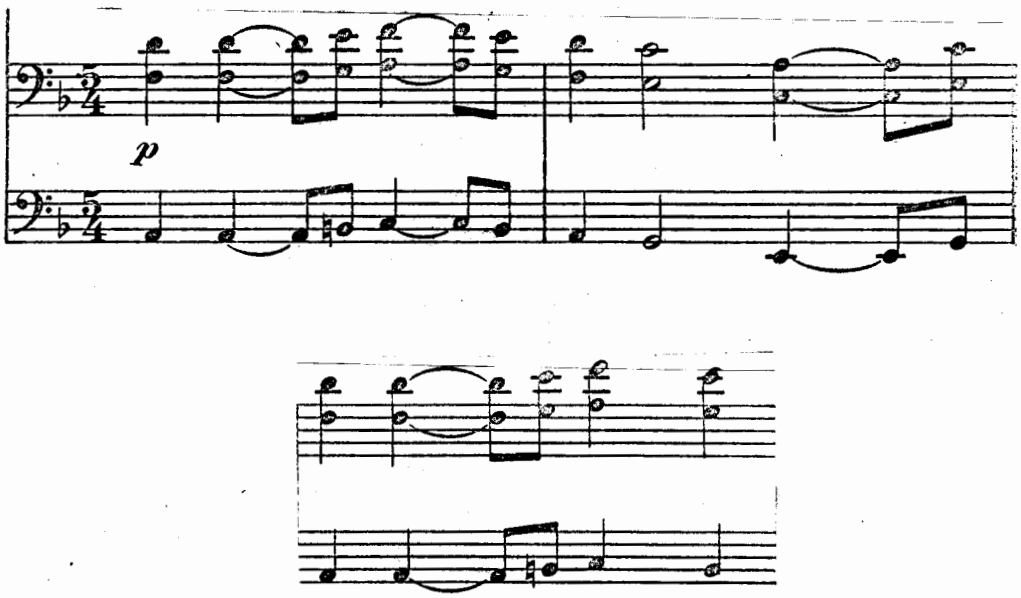


Example 9. Chanson Romanesque, measures 33-34.



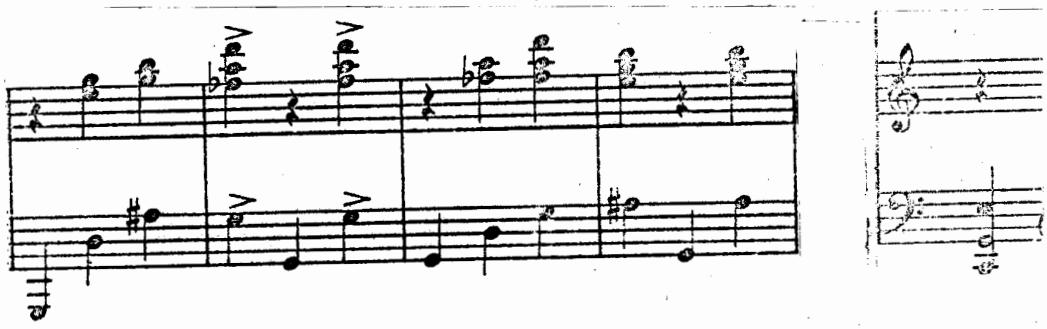
Number I ends in a B-flat major chord with the added sixth. Number II begins with a chord in the Dorian mode, and at measure 16 it modulates to F major, where it remains to the end.

Example 10. Chanson Épique, measures 1-3.



Number III starts in G Mixolydian and ends in C major at measure 102.

Example 11. Chanson à Boire, measures 3-6 and 102.



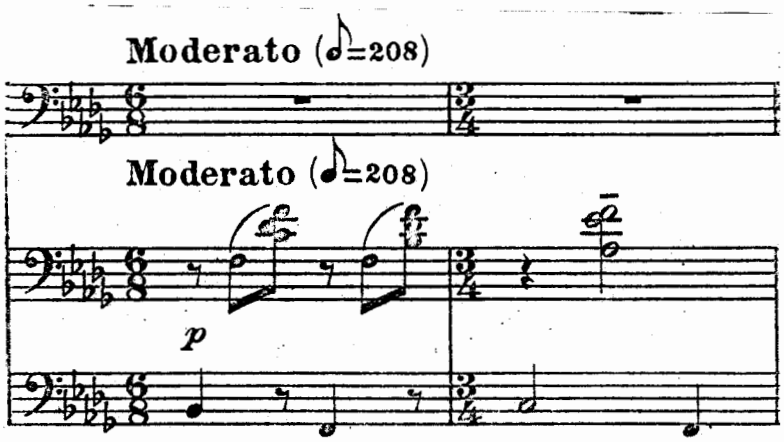
Throughout the three songs Ravel used his characteristic major sevenths as bitones in the chords of the accompaniment. (See Example 11, the last note in measure three.)

IV. RHYTHM AND METER

Ravel's fascination with rhythms is seen in his employment of Spanish dance rhythms as the basic foundation of the cycle. Ravel's changes in time usually involve simple alteration between two different meters. The first song, alternating between 6/8 and 3/4 meter, is characteristic of the Spanish dance, the Quajira. On the other hand, the second song, with meter 5/4, is derived from a Basque dance, the Zortzico. The third song, with a meter 3/4, is based on the Spanish Jota.

In the first song the composer has used a two measure rhythmic pattern, repeated four times in the accompaniment.

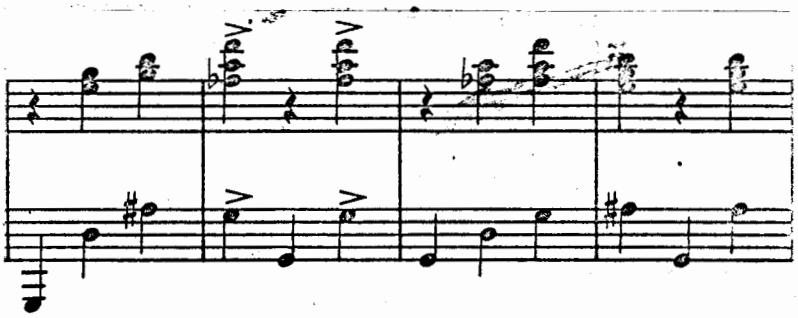
Example 12. Chanson Romanesque, measures 1-2.



In Number II, once the rhythm is established in the second song by the accompaniment, it is not repeated. Number III

is similar to Number I, in that a basic four measure rhythmic pattern is established and repeated four times.

Example 13. Chanson à Boire, measures 3-6.

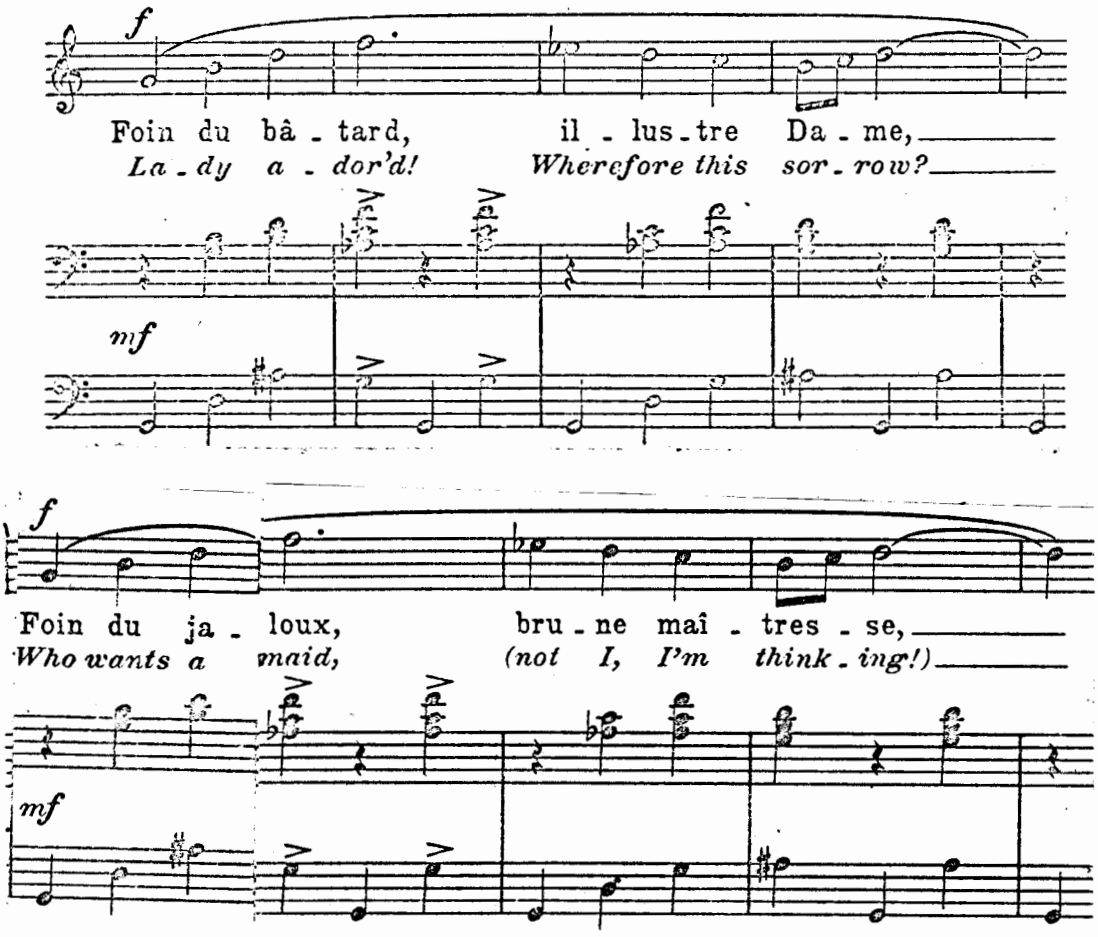


Throughout the first and third songs the accompaniment is rhythmically strong, with a very free vocal style.

V. FORM

Spanish and Basque Dance Forms, such as the Quajira, Zortzico, and Jota, supply the form for the cycle. In the first and second songs the accompaniment strictly maintains the dance forms, with the text dictating the vocal line. On the other hand, the third song follows a strophic form, in which, after completion of the first forty-one measures, the first part is repeated again to a different text.

Example 14. Chanson à Boire, measures 7-11 and 53-57.



CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

Ravel's song cycle Don Quichotte à Dulcinée presents a challenge to the singer through the distinctive characteristics of Ravel's style. A better understanding of his style may be obtained by studying his life and vocal works. With this knowledge the singer should understand shifts between recitative and cantabile, an undulating melodic line, and harmonies between the major scales and modality. Ravel's fascination with Spanish dance rhythms is evident in his employment of dance forms in the accompaniment supported with a free vocal line. His utilization of prosody is shown in the third song where the vowel "ah" is used for a special effect. After a thorough study of this composition the vocalist should be able to render an artistic performance of the cycle.

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