

DLA Thesis

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Claude Debussy and Pierre Louÿs: The Songs of
Bilitis

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I. The background for the research

In the public mind Debussy is considered more of an eccentric impressionist and symbolist composer. Among his works, his compositions for piano, some orchestral works (*La mer*) or his only opera (*Pelléas and Mélisande*) are mostly mentioned. However, songs played a very decisive role in his life, they are woven throughout his entire oeuvre. Despite of this, it is difficult to find a comprehensive study or study volume about them in the literature of musicology. There is a study written by Margaret Cobb (*The Poetic Debussy, A Collection of His Song Texts and Selected Letters*) which is worth mentioning where she collected letters written by Debussy that are in some way discuss certain songs. But we cannot call the collection of the letters complete, it would be almost impossible to display every single letter. The Debussy-Louÿs correspondence for example - where they write extensively about their mutual plans or about the *Songs of Bilitis* - are not all included in the book. It is important to mention William Gibbons' study *Debussy as a Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in*

the Trois Chansons de Bilitis, which examines the three songs in the light of the entire Louÿs work consisting of 147 songs.

II. Sources

I have been researching in French, English and Hungarian. Among the sources in French, François Lesure's comprehensive Debussy biography and Jean-Paul Goujon's detailed Louÿs biography were indispensable. One chapter of Gordon Millan's book *Pierre Louÿs ou le culte de l'amitié* is specifically about the relationship and friendship between the composer and the writer. The *Journal de Meryem* (published by Jean-Paul Goujon), written by Pierre Louÿs during his travels in Algeria, is definitely worth mentioning, in which he writes in detail about the "Ouled Naïl", named Meryem ben Ali who inspired the character of Bilitis. The last chapter of my dissertation is based on Jane Bathori's writing about the performance of Debussy's songs, in which she also dedicates a chapter to the *Song of Bilitis*, and gives advices to the singers bar by

bar. Among the English-language sources, I would highlight the study volume *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, and the article "Mélodie" by David Tunley in the *Lexicon Grove*, which provided a starting point for approaching Debussy songs. Among the sources available in Hungarian, József Ujfalussy's biography of Debussy was especially valuable. For the analysis I was able to lean on the study of Gergely Fazekas entitled "Melodic Formation and Polyphony in Debussy's Music".

III. Methodology

In my dissertation, I strive to provide a comprehensive picture of Debussy's songs, the friendship between Debussy and Louÿs, their artistic relationship and their masterpiece, the group of compositions of the *Songs of Bilitis*. In addition to analyzing the three works individually (*Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, *Musique de Scène pour les Chansons de Bilitis* and the *Six Épigrapbes Antiques*), the focus is on the three songs, which I also analyze from the performer's point of view, and examine

their different interpretations. A special aspect is the comparison of pronunciation, natural intonation and rhythm of the french language contrary the melodies written by Debussy.

IV. Results

In the first chapter, I present the development of the genre of the French *mélodie*. I approach Debussy's songs by examining the compositions of his predecessors and contemporaries, as well as the *Three Songs of Bilitis*. I will highlight some songs - not only from Debussy - in which certain elements from Bilitis songs can be recognised. The studied songs include the generation of composers lived before Debussy such as Charles Gounod, Jules Massenet, Camille Saint-Saëns and also his contemporaries Gabriel Fauré and Henri Duparc.

In the second chapter, I write about the eccentric figure of Pierre Louÿs, followed by the friendship of the two artists, which is significant not only because of the creation of the Bilitis opuses. They had many compositions planned together which in the end were not

even started, or only small fragments were created. In addition, Louÿs played a major role in the creation of Debussy's one and only opera, *Pelléas and Mélisande*. Without his encouragement and support the work might never have been completed.

In the third chapter, I explore the historical background of the Bilitis songs, first focusing on the verse cycle and then as a piece of music. After that, I analyze the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis* in detail.

In the fourth chapter, I introduce and analyze twelve selected songs of the *Musique de Scène pour les Chansons de Bilitis* and I present their lyrics in my own translation. In the fifth chapter, I examine the *Six Epigraphes Antiques*, and since the piano duo was inspired by certain movements of Stage music, I compare the two pieces of music in my analysis.

In the last chapter, I go through the three songs again, at this time from the performer's point of view. I introduce and compare different recordings in the light of Jane Bathori's interpretation guidance.

V. Documentation of activity related to the topic of the dissertation.

Concerts

November 2018 – Concert at the Festival "Pour que la nuit soit propice, regards sur Debussy" (Lyon, France)

November 2021 - Concert in the Solti hall of the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music – program included Debussy's songs – with soprano Anikó Kronauer-Vida

December 2021 - Concert in the Solti hall of the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music – program included songs by Schönberg and Debussy - with soprano singer Anikó Kronauer-Vida

April 2022 - Concert in the Solti hall of the Ferenc Liszt University of Music – program included Debussy songs - with soprano Anikó Kronauer-Vida