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MUSIQUE DE SCÈNE POUR LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS

BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY ON POEMS BY PIERRE LOUÏS,

A LECTURE RECITAL, TOGETHER WITH THREE

RECITALS OF SELECTED WORKS OF J.S. BACH,

S. PROKOFIEV, J. FRANCAIX, W. PISTON,

L.V. BEETHOVEN, AND OTHERS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
North Texas State University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

Pamela Jackson Youngblood, B.M., M.M.

Denton, Texas

May, 1980

Gm Youngblood, Pamela Jackson, Musique de Scène pour Les Chansons de Bilitis by Claude Debussy on Poems by Pierre Louÿs, a Lecture Recital, Together with Three Recitals of Selected Works of J.S. Bach, S. Prokofiev, J. Francaix, W. Piston, L.V. Beethoven, and Others. Doctor of Musical Arts (Flute Performance), May, 1980, 24 pp., 5 figures, bibliography, 14 titles.

The incidental music for Chansons de Bilitis is little known and rarely performed. However, the relegation of this work to the realms of obscurity is highly unjustified. Chansons de Bilitis requires an unusual combination of instruments: two flutes, two harps, and celesta in addition to a reciter. The work is a theater piece in the tradition of melodrama, with spoken text and background music in alternation. Despite the rather unique nature of the work, many of the melodic, textural, and orchestrational devices for which Debussy is noted are evident. The music is through-composed; each movement mirrors and emphasizes the meaning and mood of the accompanying poem. Because of the fragmentary nature of the music and its rather subordinate role in the total theater work, the primary emphasis in gaining an appreciation of the value of the work lies in an investigation of its historical background.

Chansons de Bilitis, a series of 143 poems in prose, was one of the most celebrated literary hoaxes of the nineteenth century. While the volume was purported to be a French translation of an ancient Greek poetess of the sixth century B. C. named Bilitis, the poems were in fact composed by Pierre Louÿs. Debussy wrote incidental music for twelve of the poems which were to be recited and mimed. The work was premiered on February 7, 1901, with Debussy performing at the celesta.

In 1914, Debussy arranged six of the pieces from the incidental music under the title Six Epigraphes Antiques for both piano duet and piano solo.

Tape recordings of all performances submitted as dissertation requirements are on deposit in the North Texas State University Library.

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North Texas State University  
School of Music

presents

# Pamela Jackson Youngblood

in a

## Graduate Flute Recital

assisted by

**Judy Fisher, piano**

**Charles Brown, harpsichord**

Tuesday, July 18, 1978

8:15 p.m.

Recital Hall

### PROGRAM

Sonata in C Major..... J. S. Bach

Andante; Presto  
Allegro  
Adagio  
Minuets I and II

Sonata in D Major.....Sergei Prokofieff, Op. 94

Moderato  
Allegretto Scherzando  
Andante  
Allegro con brio

### INTERMISSION

Three Romances..... Robert Schumann, Op. 94

Nicht schnell  
Einfach, innig  
Nicht schnell

Ballade..... Frank Martin

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts

North Texas State University  
School of Music  
presents

# Pamela Jackson Youngblood

in a

## Graduate Flute Recital

assisted by

**Charles Brown, organ**

**Judy Fisher, piano**

**Sylvia Grier, piano**

Monday, February 26, 1979      8:15 p.m.      Concert Hall

### PROGRAM

\* Miracles (1978) ..... Daniel Pinkham

for flute and organ

- I. The Miracle at Cana
- II. The Miracle on the Lake
- III. The Miracle at Bethesda
- IV. The Miracle in the Country of the Gerasenes
- V. The Miracle at the Roadside

Partita in A Minor ..... J. S. Bach

for solo flute

- Allemande
- Corrente
- Sarabande
- Bouree Anglaise

### INTERMISSION

\*\* Concerto (1970)  
for flute and orchestra ..... Jean Francaix

- Presto
- Andantino
- Scherzo
- Allegro

\* Believed to be the Southwest premiere.

\*\* Believed to be the American premiere; composer's reduction  
edited for two pianos by the soloist.

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts.

North Texas State University  
School of Music

presents

# Pamela Jackson Youngblood

in a

## Graduate Flute Recital

assisted by

**Judy Fisher, pianist**

**Charles Brown, harpsichordist**

Monday, October 29, 1979      8:15 P.M.      Concert Hall

### PROGRAM

- Sonata II in E-Flat Major ..... J. S. Bach  
Allegro moderato  
Siciliano  
Allegro
- Concerto (1971) ..... Walter Piston  
Alquanto largo;  
Lento espressivo;  
Allegro

### INTERMISSION

- Serenade, Op. 41 ..... L. Van Beethoven  
Entrata  
Tempo ordinario d'un Menuetto  
Trio I  
Trio II  
Molto allegro  
Andante con Variazioni  
Allegro Scherzando e vivace  
Adagio  
Allegro vivace e disinvolto
- Sonatina ..... Eldin Burton  
Allegretto grazioso  
Andantino Sognando  
Allegro giocoso (quasi fandango)

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts



North Texas State University  
School of Music

presents

**Pamela Jackson Youngblood**

in a

**Lecture Recital**

Musique de Scène pour Les Chansons de Bilitis  
by Claude Debussy

on Poems by Pierre Louÿs

assisted by

**Linda Kirkpatrick, flute**

**Lori Woodard, harp**

**Carolyn Armstrong, harp**

**Judy Fisher, piano and celesta**

**Sondra Ferstl, reciter**

**Greg Depp, conductor**

Monday, March 10, 1980

8:15 P.M.

Concert Hall

**P R O G R A M**

Six Epigraphes Antiques

Claude Debussy

I. Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été

piano four hands, Judy Fisher and Pamela Youngblood

Chansons de Bilitis

1. Chant Pastoral
2. Les Comparaisons
3. Les Contes
4. Chanson
5. La Partie D'Osselets
6. Bilitis
7. Le Tombeau sans Nom
8. Les Courtisanes Égyptiennes
9. Eau Pure du Bassin
10. La Danseuse aux Crotales
11. Le Souvenir de Mnasidika
12. La Pluie au Matin

for flutes, harps, celesta, and reciter

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Musical Arts in Flute

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MUSIQUE DE SCÈNE POUR LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS

BY CLAUDE DEBUSSY ON POEMS BY PIERRE LOUÏS

The incidental music for Chansons de Bilitis is little known and rarely performed. However, the relegation of this work to the realms of obscurity is highly unjustified. Chansons de Bilitis requires an unusual combination of instruments: two flutes, two harps, and celesta in addition to a reciter. The work is a theater piece in the tradition of melodrama, with spoken text and background music in alternation. Despite the rather unique nature of the work, many of the melodic, textural, and orchestrational devices for which Debussy is noted are evident. The music is through-composed; each movement mirrors and emphasizes the meaning and mood of the accompanying poem. Because of the fragmentary nature of the music and its rather subordinate role in the total theater work, the primary emphasis in gaining an appreciation of the value of the work lies in an investigation of its historical background. Since the creation of the work was directly influenced by the unique relationship between poet and composer, a close look at the friendship of LouÏs and Debussy provides an appropriate beginning.

"Among my friends you are certainly the one I have loved most."<sup>1</sup> Claude Debussy paid this tribute to his friend Pierre

Louÿs in a letter of 1903. For almost a decade, beginning in 1893, Louÿs was Debussy's closest friend. At the beginning of their association, both were little known to the public. Louÿs, who at age twenty-three was eight years younger than Debussy, had published only one small volume of poems, Astarté, in a private printing of seventy-five copies. In 1896, after three other limited editions, Louÿs completed Aphrodite, a novel of courtesan life in ancient Alexandria, thus earning for himself a reputation as an "apologist and apostle of the antique modes of life."<sup>2</sup> However, Louÿs preferred his earlier seclusion to his new fame and published nothing from 1900 to his death in 1925.

Louÿs' father had died when Pierre was eighteen, leaving him a small fortune of three hundred thousand francs. But the reckless youth had ruined his health; his doctor diagnosed tuberculosis and warned the young Louÿs that he had only three years to live unless he thoroughly reformed his habits. Taking this verdict very seriously, Louÿs divided his inheritance into three parts, one for each year, and proceeded to carry on even more recklessly than before.<sup>3</sup> Paul Valéry, another poet, described the young Louÿs as

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy: His Life and Mind, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), I, 160.

<sup>2</sup>Vance Thompson, French Portraits (Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1900, 131, cited in Arthur B. Wenk, Claude Debussy and the Poets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 171.

<sup>3</sup>Victor I. Seroff, Debussy, Musician of France (New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1956), 124.

the most timid, the most haughty, the most fastidious, delicate and most stubborn of young men, with a captivating charm I have seen only in him . . . his talents, his interests, his enthusiasm sometimes bursting into violence, his irresistible and overwhelming caprices, the charming surprises that he alone knew how to make - all the traits of a man unique in friendship.<sup>4</sup>

When Debussy and Louÿs met, Louÿs had started on what was supposed to be his third and final year. The two were highly compatible and soon became almost inseparable friends. Debussy, who was always hovering on the brink of financial disaster, admired Louÿs' independence and his comfortable living on inherited wealth. Louÿs was passionately interested in music, and Debussy always enjoyed the company of literary men. Debussy developed an interest in ancient literature and art after Louÿs shared his vast knowledge of the subject with him. At one point, the two friends even decided to rent a house together, but changed their minds while waiting for the legal arrangements to be completed, since, as Louÿs said, "best friendships can rarely withstand the test of an obligation to live together."<sup>5</sup>

These two friends, who shared so many of the same attitudes about life, art, and love, were repeatedly unsuccessful in any kind of artistic collaboration. Among their

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

projects which never came to fruition were a ballet on Daphnis et Chloé, a symphonic suite on Louÿs' Le Roi Pausole, and a musical adaptation of Louÿs' Aphrodite. The only music to result from their decade of friendship was that associated with Chansons de Bilitis.<sup>6</sup>

Louÿs always felt that warmer climates were more conducive to his writing; in fact, several of his major works, including Chansons de Bilitis, were written during a time when he made six trips to North Africa. The Parisian winters were always hard on him physically, but regaining his energy with the coming of milder weather, Louÿs began work on Chansons de Bilitis on March 5, 1894, and completed several of the series of poems before the summer.<sup>7</sup>

In early July, Louÿs and his friend Ferdinand Hérold set out for the Wagnerian Festival in Bayreuth. On the way, they travelled to Champel, near Geneva, to visit the writer André Gide, who was undergoing hydrotherapy. Gide, who had just returned from his winter's stay at Biskra in Algeria, related many stories about his amorous adventures there. Louÿs was particularly interested in Meriem ben Atala, a young Arab beauty and a member of the Oulad Naïl tribe,

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<sup>6</sup>Arthur B. Wenk, Claude Debussy and the Poets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 175.

<sup>7</sup>H. P. Clive, Pierre Louÿs, a Biography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 99-102.

"whose young girls, by tradition turned to prostitution for the purpose of accumulating their dowry."<sup>8</sup> In his Si le grain ne meurt, Gide gives an alluring sketch of Meriem ben Atala:

Meriem was amber-skinned, firm-fleshed. Her figure was round but still almost childish for she was barely sixteen. I can only compare her to a bacchante - the one on the Gaeta vase, for instance - because of her tinkling bracelets too, which she was continually shaking. . . . Her cousin En Barka was dancing there too. They danced in the antique fashion of the Oulad, their heads straight and erect, their busts motionless, their hands agile, their whole bodies shaken by the rhythmic beating of their feet. How much I liked this "Mohammedan music" with its steady, obstinate, incessant flow; it went to my head, stupefied me like an opiate, drowsily and voluptuously benumbed my thoughts.<sup>9</sup>

Gide added, "Louÿs persuaded himself he owed it to me as a friend to make Meriem his mistress."<sup>10</sup>

With this information, Louÿs, though a fanatical Wagnerian, abruptly decided to give up the spiritual pleasures of Bayreuth for the physical delights of Biskra. Louÿs' letters to his stepbrother Georges indicate that he would have preferred to go to Africa without Hérold, but sensing this, Gide strongly and maliciously urged Hérold to tag along. Thus bearing gifts from Gide, the two left on July 15.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 103.

<sup>9</sup>Lockspeiser, op. cit., 175.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

Louÿs and Hérold spent five days in Algiers before travelling to Constantine and then on to Biskra. The heat was so intense at Biskra - thirty-six degrees centigrade at midnight - that Louÿs became feverishly ill and they were forced to return to the milder climate of Constantine. Meriem joined them there in early August. Louÿs was totally enchanted with her and Gide claims that her presence can be felt in many of the Chansons de Bilitis.

In a letter to Gide dated August 10, Louÿs sketched this portrait:

Meriem is the most beautiful, the most graceful, and the most delicate being I have ever seen. She is astonishingly small for a Javanese woman . . . She is also American Indian and sometimes the Virgin Mary and then a Tyrian courtesan, under her jewels which are the same as those from ancient tombs: the diadem, the golden magoulette, and the silver periscelis.

She is all that; unfortunately it is as impossible to lead this small animal in a civilized city as to introduce a panther in a well-furnished reception room. She cannot be held down. Hérold who is sweetness itself agrees with me . . . As for me, I beg your pardon, but I beat her like a little dog, but do not worry, I will not ruin her, but I beat her, and not with a flower. Now do not imagine that we are talking about a daughter of the desert on whom one raises one's hand, in as much as she has an admirable jaw which is always ready to bite and thirteen silver bracelets which are a terrible club.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>"Méryem est l'ê<sup>4</sup>tre le plus joli, le plus gracieux, le plus délicat que j'aie encore vue. Elle est étonnamment petite javanaise. . . . Elle est aussi Indienne d'Amérique, et par moments Vierge Marie, et encore courtisane tyrienne,



Many of the Chansons de Bilitis and the prefatory Vie de Bilitis (or Life of Bilitis) were written while Louÿs was in Constantine. He appropriately dedicated the volume to Gide, with a special reference to "M. b. A.," that is, Meriem ben Atala.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of August, Louÿs returned to Paris with a burnous, or Arabian hooded cloak, and endless stories of his erotic discoveries. He completed the manuscript of Chansons de Bilitis on September 8. However, even as the type was being set, Louÿs edited, polished, and rewrote one piece after another. For some of the poems he wrote as many as five versions before feeling at all satisfied. With some financial assistance from his brother Georges, Chansons de Bilitis was published in December by the Librairie de l'art indépendant.<sup>13</sup>

sous ses bijoux qui sont les mêmes que ceux des tombeaux antiques: le diadème, la margoulette d'or et les périscelis d'argent.

"Elle est tout cela; malheureusement il est aussi impossible de trainer ce petit animal dans une ville civilisée que de présenter une panthere dans un salon bien rangé. Elle est intenable. Hérold qui est la douceur même supporte et cède. Quant à moi, je t'en demande pardon, mais je la bats comme une petite chienne. Sois tranquille, je ne te l'abîme pas, mais je la bats, et non pas avec une fleur. Maintenant tu n'imagines pas que c'est qu'une 'Fille du Désert' sur qui on lève la main, d'autant qu'elle a une admirable mâchoire qui est toujours prête à mordre, et treize bracelets d'argent plein qui sont un terrible casse-tête."

Clive, op. cit., 106.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

The Chansons de Bilitis was one of the most celebrated literary hoaxes of the nineteenth century. The complete title, Les Chansons de Bilitis, traduites du grec pour la premiere fois par P. L. (translated from the Greek for the first time by P. L.), provides a ready clue to the hoax, for while the volume was purported to be a French translation of an ancient Greek poetess of the sixth century B. C. named Bilitis, the poems were in fact composed by Louÿs. He prefaced the set of poems with "Vie de Bilitis," a supposedly factual account of the poetess' early defloration at Pamphylia, her life in Lesbos, her friendship with Sappho, and her later career as a religious prostitute in the service of Aphrodite at Amathus in Cyprus. Louÿs relates the recent discovery of her tomb, whose walls were covered with the poems in this collection, by the German scholar, Professor G. Heim, whom he identifies as the first editor of her poems published at Leipzig in 1894. Louÿs had even considered inserting an advertisement signed by Heim, though he later rejected this plan.<sup>14</sup> Louÿs did, however, pursue the spoof by publishing Notes sur les sources des Chansons de Bilitis.<sup>15</sup>

Obviously, Bilitis was not a historical person of the sixth century B. C.; rather, her creation was inspired by a "brief passage in Philostratus's Life of Appollonius about a certain Damophyle, described as being of Pamphylian origin,

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 110.

<sup>15</sup>Wenk, op. cit., 125.

an intimate of Sappho, and the author of hymns in honor of Artemis."<sup>16</sup> According to Louÿs, anyone with a knowledge of German should have begun to suspect the hoax, since "G/Heim = Geheim = Le mystérieux."<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, many scholars were fooled, as the following description of Robert Cardinne-Petit, Louÿs' private secretary from 1917 until his death, confirms:

After the appearance of the Chansons de Bilitis an impassioned debate ensued among all the noted archeologists who supported Louÿs' hoax with all the force of their erudition. The discovery of the tomb of Bilitis was especially remarked . . . Pierre Louÿs had sent the translation of Meleager (genuine, that) and of the Chansons de Bilitis to a M. X., professor of Greek archeology at one of the leading universities. M. X., in a letter of thanks, declared that Meleager and Bilitis were not unknown to him, and that he had for a long time considered them personal friends.<sup>18</sup>

Madame Jean Bertheroy, "Lauréate de l'Académie," went so far as to publish a new translation of six of the chansons in the Revue des jeunes filles, January 5, 1896.

Other reviewers were not quite so gullible. Paul Ginisty, in the Gil Blas on January 5, 1895, said that if it was a literary game, it was charming. But if it was a true translation, it was surely a rather free translation, for

<sup>16</sup>Clive, op. cit., 110.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Wenk, op. cit., 175.

inasmuch as the Greek spirit was evoked there, the poems appeared to also be imprinted somewhat with the modern spirit.<sup>19</sup>

In the Echo de Paris on January 21, Jean Lorrain referred to the Chansons de Bilitis [sic] of René Louÿs as a "delicious pastiche." This compliment, though flattering, showed that Pierre Louÿs was still hardly known outside his own circle of friends. Lorrain later included the Chansons de Bilitis among the select books which he called "bedside friends."<sup>20</sup>

Reviewers usually mentioned the erotic character and underlying lesbianism of the poems. Ginisty remarked that this rather perverse effort of art was an illusion of the natural in the abnormal. But few readers were shocked; instead, critical reaction was mostly favorable.<sup>21</sup> In the Mercure de France of April 1895, Camille Mauclair said that the erudition and technical detail of reconstruction was never offensive and that the odious and almost inevitably bookish side was avoided. A whole troubling psychology of

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<sup>19</sup>"Si c'est un jeu littéraire, il est charmant. Si c'est une traduction véritable, ce doit être une traduction assez libre, car, tant que s'évoque là l'esprit grec, ces poèmes paraissent imprégnés aussi quelque peu d'esprit moderne."

Clive, op. cit., 111.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 112.

sexual inversion was suggested through this work of Pierre Louÿs, "who is completely a poet."<sup>22</sup>

The only severe critical note was struck by the famous German classical scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff. In a heavy and humorless article published in the Göttinger gelehrte Anzeigen in 1896, he criticized Louÿs for displaying an inadequate knowledge of the Greek language, for making errors in chronology and, in general, for debasing the true spirit of the Hellenic civilization. In addition to these scholarly objections, he made a moralistic condemnation of the "in part disgustingly obscene content" of the poems.<sup>23</sup> Oddly enough, this was the only review which Louÿs included in the bibliography of the 1898 edition.

Chansons de Bilitis is a series of 143 poems in prose. To contribute to the look of authenticity, Louÿs included a list of the poems which he had not translated in the table of contents. Within this series of poems,

Each song consists of four prose stanzas, suggesting the probable length of a prose version of a Sapphic or Alcaic stanza - a correspondance which unquestionably aided in winning credence for the hoax. The verse comes to a full stop at the end of each stanza. Beyond this restriction,

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<sup>22</sup>"L'érudition, le détail technique de reconstitution ne blessent jamais ici. Le côté bouquin, si odieux et presque inévitable, est évité. . . . Toute une psychologie troublante de l'inversion sexuelle se devine là . . . M. Pierre Louÿs est tout à fait un poète . . ."

Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

the poems have a complete freedom, and the infinite changes of rhythm possible in such lyric prose defy analysis.<sup>24</sup>

After they had been published, Debussy read the poems. In January 1895, he wrote to Louÿs that everyone was reading Chansons de Bilitis. At that time, Debussy was working on the first revisions of his opera, Pelléas et Mélisande. Thus, it was not until December 1897 that Debussy turned to the poems as a source for musical composition. The result was a cycle of three songs for voice and piano including "La Flûte de Pan," reflecting Debussy's attraction to the flute as an instrument of pure melody, "L'Image," and "Le Tombeau des Naiades." Debussy dedicated the work to Louÿs.<sup>25</sup>

In October 1898, Louÿs tried to persuade Debussy to accompany a singer in a performance of the Bilitis songs in conjunction with a lecture on the poems to be given by Achille Segard. Debussy declined, saying:

The Chansons de Bilitis in marvelous language contains everything there is of gentleness and cruelty in passion so that the most subtly voluptuous people are forced to recognize the childishness of their games vis-à-vis the terrible and seductive Bilitis.

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<sup>24</sup>D'Elbert Ernest Keenan, "Pierre Louÿs" (dissertation, Ithaca, New York, 1927), 51, cited in Arthur B. Wenk, Claude Debussy and the Poets (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 179.

<sup>25</sup>Lockspeiser, op. cit., 175.

Would you tell me now what can my three small pieces of music add to a rendition of the pure and simple language of your text? Nothing at all. I would even say, it would adroitly disturb the emotions of the listeners. Why then tune Bilitis' voice to major or minor scales, when her own voice is the most persuasive in the world? When Bilitis is present we should let her speak alone.<sup>26</sup>

The songs were not publicly performed until March 17, 1900, with Debussy accompanying Blanche Marot. Six months later Fernand Samuel, director of the Théâtre des Variétés, asked Louÿs for a version of twelve other poems from Chansons de Bilitis to be recited and mimed. (Fernand Samuel was actually a Jewish pseudonym which Théodore Louveau had adopted so that he might compete more successfully with the many prominent Jewish directors.)<sup>27</sup> Louÿs in turn asked Debussy if he would consider writing eight pages of violins, silences, and ringing chords for the occasion, even though he felt that Samuel would prefer to have another composer,

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<sup>26</sup> "Donc, Mr. A. Segard va faire une conférence sur les Chansons de Bilitis, qui contiennent, dans une merveilleuse langue, tout ce qu'il y a d'ardemment tendre et cruel dans le fait d'être passionné, tellement, que les gens les plus subtilement voluptueux sont obligés de reconnaître l'enfantillage de leurs jeux vis-à-vis de cette terrible et charmeuse Bilitis.

"Veux-tu me dire, maintenant, ce que viendraient ajouter mes trois petites musiques à l'audition pure et simple de ton texte? Rien du tout, mon vieux; je dirais même que cela disperserait maladroitement l'émotion des auditeurs."

Wenk, op. cit., 177.

<sup>27</sup> Lockspeiser, op. cit., 176.

Gaston Serpette, write the score.<sup>28</sup> Debussy, with a sick wife and no money with which to pay the rent, agreed to provide the music, which would be presented at the Théâtre des Variétés after an initial performance at the Salle des Fêtes of the Journal, a Paris daily.<sup>29</sup>

Debussy wrote the incidental music for two flutes, two harps, and celesta. While the sensuous and exotic mood evoked was similar to that of the song cycle, the musical material was completely new. Louÿs himself supervised the rehearsals, apparently not without pleasure, for he wrote to his brother Georges on January 23, 1901,

I am spending every afternoon this week with naked women. It is a fine thing. It is a question of the models who are going to put on eleven of the Chansons de Bilitis on the stage of the Journal, some with draped veils, some with kôs robes, some without anything at all except their two hands, or their position, three-quarters to the rear.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Correspondance de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs, ed. Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1945), 151.

<sup>29</sup>Seroff, op. cit., 179.

<sup>30</sup>"Je passe cette semaine toutes mes après-midi avec des femmes nues. C'est du joli. Il s'agit des modèles qui vont représenter onze Chansons de Bilitis sur la scène du Journal, tantôt sans rien du tout que leurs deux mains ou leur position de 3/4 en arrière."

Clive, op. cit., 170.



When news of this brazen display of unveiled or at least partially veiled beauty reached Senator René Bérenger, he threatened the editor of the newspaper with prosecution if he proceeded with the spectacle as planned. (Bérenger was a distinguished legislator and politician who violently and without compromise opposed any activity which he deemed a threat to moral rectitude, frequently to the point of censuring even essentially harmless incidents.)<sup>31</sup>

Despite these objections, the performance took place at the Salle des Fêtes of the Journal on February 7, 1901. Debussy himself performed at the celesta, apparently improvising his part, for it did not appear in the manuscript. The only known review of this original performance appeared in Le Journal on February 8. The reviewer claimed that it was one of the most artistic spectacles that he had ever seen. The songs of Bilitis, accompanied by tableaux vivants whose staging was watched over in every detail by Pierre Louÿs himself, and a captivating music by M. de Bussy [sic], obtained an enthusiastic response. He termed Debussy's music "graceful and ingeniously archaic," although he consistently misspelled his name as "de Bussy," thus showing a certain lack of familiarity with the composer. He added that "the poetry and music, which would have sufficed to keep the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 171.

audience under its charm, were even more enhanced by the most artistic tableaux vivants that have ever been provided for an audience. The models brought the precious skill of their impeccable forms in a great effort toward the ideal dreamed by the poet. To contemplate these marvelous nude women, sometimes muted, sometimes powerful, always pure and draped with art, the audience could believe itself transported to the great eras of pure nudity."<sup>32</sup> Despite this glowing review, the promised performances at the Théâtre des Variétés inexplicably never materialized.

Louÿs and Debussy had been unable to completely sustain their intimate friendship after their marriages in 1899. However, when Debussy left his wife Lilly for another woman in June, 1904, Louÿs strongly condemned Debussy's actions. All contact between the two completely ceased, particularly after Lilly's attempted suicide in October. Although no

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<sup>32</sup>"Les Chansons de Bilitis, accompagnées de tableaux vivants dont la mise au point avait été minutieusement surveillée par Pierre Louÿs lui-même, et d'une musique captivante de M. de Bussy, ont obtenu un succès d'enthousiasme.

"Les vers, la musique, qui eussent suffi pour nous retenir sous le charme, s'augmentaient encore de tableaux vivants les plus artistiques qu'il nous ait jamais été donné d'applaudir. . . .

"Pour la composition de ces divers tableaux, Mlles Louÿs, Marcel, Darcy, Marie Chaves, Lucienne Delbeau, etc., ont apporté le précieux appoint de leurs formes impeccables, et un grand effort vers l'idéal revê par le poète. A contempler ces merveilleuses académies, tantôt grêles, tantôt puissantes, toujours pures et drapées avec art, les spectateurs purent se croire transportés aux grandes époques de la nudité pure."

Correspondance de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs, ed. Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1945), 195-6.

details are available, at least a superficial reconciliation between Louÿs and Debussy is said to have taken place several years later.<sup>33</sup>

The score of Chansons de Bilitis was forgotten until the summer of 1914, when, eager to provide his publisher with a new work, Debussy arranged six of these pieces under the title Six Epigraphes Antiques for both piano duet and piano solo. In this version, Debussy expanded the approximately 150 measures of the incidental music into 272. Only about half of the original incidental music was retained in the Epigraphes: the remainder was newly composed. Debussy cleverly juxtaposed the old and new material and, in listening, the connecting links are not obvious. In the use of modes, the distinction between old and new is more obvious: the material borrowed from the incidental music is highly modal while the new material generally is not.

The correlation between the Epigraphes and portions of the incidental music is readily apparent in most cases. The first Epigraph, "Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été," is quite clearly based on "Chant Pastoral" of Bilitis. The flute theme of the "Chant Pastoral" is heard immediately in the piano version.

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<sup>33</sup>Clive, op. cit., 181.



Fig. 1--"Chant Pastoral," Chansons de Bilitis,  
flute theme, measures 1-3.

Modéré dans le style d'une pastorale (♩ = 80)

Primo

Modéré dans le style d'une pastorale (♩ = 80)

Secondo

Fig. 2--"Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été,"  
Six Epigraphes Antiques, measures 1-2.

"Pour un tombeau sans nom," the second Epigraph, derives its thematic material from "Le Tombeau sans nom." Similar relationships exist between the fourth Epigraph, "Pour la Danseuse aux crotales," and "La Danseuse aux crotales"

of Bilitis; between the fifth Epigraph, "Pour l'Egyptienne," and "Les Courtisanes égyptiennes," number eight of Bilitis; and between the sixth Epigraph, "Pour remercier la pluie au matin," and its counterpart from Bilitis, "La pluie au matin." The exception to this easily discerned relationship is the third Epigraph, "Pour que la nuit soit propice," normally said to be based on the second chanson, "Les Comparaisons." As Henri Borgeaud has pointed out, the strongest connection seems to be the fact that "Les Comparaisons" is the chanson whose text most closely resembles the title of the Epigraph.<sup>34</sup> The Epigraphes was later orchestrated by Ernest Ansermet.

The first manuscript of Chansons de Bilitis, which was presented to Pierre Louÿs by the composer, has never been found. A partial manuscript, lacking only the celesta part (believed to have been improvised originally) came into the possession of Debussy's biographer, Léon Vallas, and is now located at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. It is this document upon which today's performance will be based. The celesta part was added to the manuscript by Pierre Boulez.

The American premiere of the incidental music took place in Los Angeles on March 2, 1959.<sup>35</sup> François Lesure

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<sup>34</sup>"Nous n'osons affirmer que la chanson les Comparaisons a inspiré la troisième épigraphe, mais parmi toute celles qui sont mentionnées dans l'article du Journal, c'est la pièce dont le texte se rapproche le plus du titre Pour que la nuit soit propice."  
Correspondance, 196.

mentions another performance at the Théâtre Marigny on April 10, 1954, with Madeleine Renaud reciting.<sup>36</sup>

In the Chansons de Bilitis, the music never conflicts with the text; instead, it serves merely as bridge material to set the mood of the poems. This music of Debussy is delicately sensual, with a soft, tempting sound and refined tone color. Debussy reinforces the ancient setting through the use of modes and scales reminiscent of Greek and Oriental music. "Le Tombeau sans Nom," for example, is built on the whole tone scale.



Fig. 3--"Le Tombeau sans Nom," Chansons de Bilitis, measures 1-2.

This melodic device may be found in works of Debussy ranging from the miniature Syrinx for flute alone to the large-scale Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un faune for large orchestra.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Sabin, "Claude Debussy: Chansons de Bilitis," The American Record Guide (June 1964), 926.

<sup>36</sup> François Lesure, Catalogue de L'Oeuvre de Claude Debussy (Geneve: Editions Minkoff, 1977), 102.

The incidental music is essentially through-composed, with each movement reflecting the meaning of the accompanying text. The only recurrence of any previous material is a brief restatement of the opening flute theme by the harps in a coda at the end of the twelfth section. This excerpt from "Les Comparaisons," in which the bird of Cyprus is depicted, illustrates Debussy's careful attention to the meaning of the text.



Fig. 4--"Les Comparaisons," Chansons de Bilitis, measures 1-4.

The following excerpt from "La Pluie au Matin" demonstrates the exotic and sometimes haunting effect resulting from the unusual combination of timbres. Here the flutes are in unison in the low register, the harps have harmonics and chords in the high register, and the celesta provides a delicate ostinato in the high register.

Handwritten musical score for "La Pluie au Matin," Chansons de Bilitis, measures 1-3. The score is written on six staves. The top staff is for the voice, with lyrics "C'est le premier et le plus doux" written below it. The second staff is for the piano. The third and fourth staves are for the celesta. The fifth and sixth staves are for the celesta. The score shows measures 1-3. The music is in 3/4 time and features a delicate, flowing melody in the voice and piano, with a celesta accompaniment.

Fig. 5--"La Pluie au Matin," Chansons de Bilitis,  
measures 1-3.

This collaboration of the two great artists and friends, Louÿs and Debussy, is truly a combined art work of delicate balance and captivating beauty.



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