



## Choral Music from *La Belle Époque*:

### Reynaldo Hahn's *Douze Rondels*

by Debra Spurgeon

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<[www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/](http://www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/)>.

**R**eynaldo Hahn (1874-1947) was a composer, singer, conductor, writer, and influential member of Parisian musical society, who lived during the period known as *la belle époque* [the beautiful era]. He composed for almost every medium, but is best known today for his vocal music, especially *mélodies*,<sup>1</sup> which number one hundred contained in eight cycles, two volumes, and a few separate titles.<sup>2</sup> Two solo *mélodie* cycles, *Douze Rondels* [Twelve Rondels] (1899) and *Etudes Latines* [Latin Etudes] (1900), are unusual in that choral works are interspersed with the solo songs. This article focuses on the three choral movements contained in the *Douze Rondels* cycle titled “Le Jour,”<sup>4</sup> “Gardez le trait de la Fenêtre,” and “La Nuit.” To the modern-day choral conductor, these works are virtually unknown, due to the lack of available scores, and because they have been over-looked, like much of the late Romantic repertoire. When lifted from the *mélodie* cycle, these pieces may be performed individually or programmed together to form a cohesive group. Either way, they are prime examples of late French Romanticism and are exemplary works of composer Reynaldo Hahn.<sup>5</sup>

Hahn has been labeled “*Le Musicien de la belle époque*,”<sup>6</sup> because he embodied the musical, social, and cultural aesthetic of France prior to World War I. To fully understand Hahn’s music, it is necessary to look at the time in which he lived.

## La Belle Époque

The beautiful era, also sometimes called the *fin-de-siècle* [end of the century], was a time of heightened artistic and literary activity in France, dating from the death of poet Victor Hugo in 1885 to the start of World War I in 1915. Composer Jules Massenet described the exotic atmosphere during the International Exposition, held in Paris in 1900: “All Paris was *en fête*. The capitol, one of the most frequented places in the world, became even more and better than that: it was a world in itself, for all people met there. All nations jostled one another; all tongues were heard and all costumes were set off against each other.”<sup>7</sup>

The musical world of Paris enjoyed hundreds of stages during the *belle époque* with each serving a particular class of Parisian society. In the early years, the music halls and *cafés*, like those in the Montmartre area, attracted the working classes. Their free and open atmosphere encouraged the development of many new “isms,” such as impressionism, symbolism, and primitivism. Shattuck writes: “To a greater extent than at any time since the Renaissance, painters, writers, and musicians lived and worked together and tried their hands at each other’s art in an atmosphere of perpetual collaboration.”<sup>8</sup> The opera and the *salons*, which served the upper classes, were lavish meeting places where the socially elite mingled with artists from every discipline. On a typical evening in a *salon*, guests were

served dinner followed by entertainment in the form of music, oratory, or discussion.

## Reynaldo Hahn

Reynaldo Hahn epitomized the artistic aesthetic at the turn of the century in France. He was a frequent performer in the fashionable *salons*, where he performed his own songs and those of other composers such as Gounod, Fauré, Duparc, Chabrier, and Massenet. When he sang, he usually accompanied himself at the piano with a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Hahn held favored status in the *salons* not only because of his attractive lyric baritone voice and piano skills, but also due to his “charming personality, intelligence, and wit.”<sup>9</sup> He reportedly spoke Spanish, French, German, and English fluently and knew a great deal about art and literature.

Hahn was born in Caracas to a Venezuelan mother and a German father who had emigrated from Hamburg. After making a fortune in the mercantile business in Caracas, the Hahn family moved to Paris when Reynaldo was four years old. A child prodigy, he gained the attention of Charles Gounod, with whom he studied composition for a time. At the age of eleven, Hahn entered the Paris Conservatory, where he studied composition with Jules Massenet, who greatly influenced not only Hahn’s compositional style, but also a whole generation of French composers. “*Le petit Vénézuélien*,” as Hahn was called at the Conservatory, was a classmate of Maurice Ravel, Gustav Charpentier, Florent Schmitt, Alfred Cortot, and Edouard Risler.<sup>10</sup> After leaving the Conservatory, Hahn studied composition briefly with Camille Saint-Saëns.

Hahn achieved early success in adolescence by composing several *mélodies* that met with critical acclaim. Two of his most famous *mélodies*, *Si mes vers avaient des ailes* [If My Verses Had Wings] and *L’Heure exquise* [Exquisite Hour], were composed when Hahn was just fourteen and sixteen, respectively. Massenet introduced the young composer to his own publisher, Georges Heugel, who subsequently published hundreds of Hahn’s works.

When he was nineteen, Hahn began frequenting the *salon* of artist Madeleine Lemaire and met two people who would become lifelong friends, writer Marcel Proust and actress Sarah Bernhardt. Much has been written in literary circles about Hahn’s relationship with Proust, which was initially passionate, but after a time evolved into a friendship that lasted until Proust’s death in 1922.<sup>11</sup> Hahn was twenty and Proust twenty-three when they first met. They collaborated on one work, *Portraits de peintres*, a set of four piano pieces based on poems by Proust (1894), and Hahn wrote four piano pieces for Proust’s novel *Les Plaisirs et les jours* (1896). Proust based several characters in his novels on Hahn. He said he wanted Hahn to be present in all characters, “like a god in disguise, unrecognized by any mortal.”<sup>12</sup>

In later life, when the musical *avant garde* began to gain prominence, Hahn turned to composing operettas, comic operas, and ballets, where his tuneful, lyrical style was always in favor. In his maturity, Hahn was a revered figure in France. He lectured on singing, wrote books and music criticism, conducted operas at Cannes, and directed the Paris Opera the last two years of his life.

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## The "Neglected and Half-Forgotten" Composers

During the early years of the twentieth century, when the musical and artistic aesthetic in France was in transition, Hahn was caught between the ideals of the late romantics and the new breed of composers. Debussy led the first successful anti-romantic movement with the introduction of Impressionism. In later years, Erik Satie and *Les Six* espoused a new doctrine that rejected both romanticism and impressionism along with any hint of Wagnerism. They preferred music that was "small, unpretentious, and aggressive."<sup>13</sup> Throughout his life, Hahn kept his distance from the musical innovators of the day and defended music "*qui cherche à plaire*" [which tries to please]. Hahn wrote: "In what way does music degrade itself by trying to attract, charm, or to please, when it seems appropriate that it should? And in music how have these rigorous judges managed to disapprove of caresses, amorous softness and voluptuous surroundings. . . ?"<sup>14</sup> The public always preferred Hahn's tuneful early pieces, composed in his teens and early twenties,

which have been characterized as possessing a "facile, melodious flow."<sup>15</sup>

The music of many late Romantic composers has not been fully examined, even though some were more famous in their own day than Debussy, Fauré, or Ravel. For example, Massenet, who is best-known today mostly for his operas, composed 280 *mélodies*, more than any other composer, and yet Pierre Bernac dismisses this mostly unknown body of music by saying it is "... so indissolubly linked to the now vanished *fin-de-siècle* salon ambience that its revival is highly unlikely."<sup>16</sup> Schuh believes these compositions form a "*terra incognita*."<sup>17</sup>

It appears to be necessary to examine these compositions not only in regard to their artistic value, but also considering the sociological function of vocal compositions influenced by Gounod, Massenet, and Saint-Saëns, especially since these played a more important role in public awareness than those of Debussy. Among the most important of the neglected and half-

forgotten, we find Reynaldo Hahn.<sup>18</sup>

## Douze Rondels

The most unusual characteristic of the *Douze Rondels mélodie* cycle is that there are three choral movements, the first, sixth, and eleventh, interspersed with solo movements. It was not uncommon for Romantic composers to write entire works for solo quartet or trio, such as Massenet's *Chanson des Bois d'Amaranthe*<sup>19</sup> [Songs of the Amaranth Woods]. However, Hahn did not intend these for a solo quartet because he used plural designations in the score: sopranos, contraltos, tenors, basses, and *divisi*. The forces required for *Douze Rondels*—soloist and full choir—make modern-day performance of the entire work on a solo program impractical. It is unclear if each movement was meant to be sung by a different performer who then joined with others to form a choir, or if a single performer sang all the solo movements and a choir performed the three choral movements. In Paris during the early years of the twentieth century, solo concerts would sometimes feature choirs. There is a small amount of information about premiers and performances of Hahn's works organized by the singer Jane Bathori, who was a supporter of contemporary composers in Paris, but there are no specific references to performances of *Douze Rondels*.<sup>20</sup>

An advertisement of Hahn's compositions by the publisher Heugel in the early 1900s lists the three choral movements



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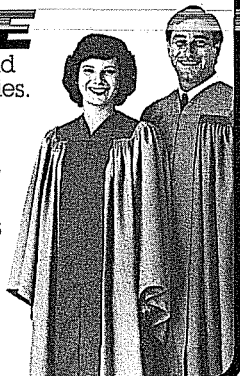
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separately. Obviously, the publisher understood that the three choral works would suffer from lack of exposure to the right audience if they were contained only in the *mélodie* cycle. The movements of *Douze Rondels* are titled:

1. "Le Jour," choral
2. "Je me metz en vostre merci," solo
3. "Le Printemps," solo
4. "L'Air," solo
5. "La Paix," solo
6. "Gardez le trait de la Fenetre," choral
7. "La Pêche," solo
8. "Quand je fus pris au Pavillon," solo
9. "Les Etoiles," solo
10. "L'Automne," solo
11. "La Nuit," choral
12. "Le Souvenir d'avoir chanté," solo

## The Poetry

Hahn chose the verses of Charles D'Orleans (1391-1465) from the distant past, Théodore De Banville (1823-1891) of the previous generation, and Catulle Mendes (1841-1909), a contemporary poet. He was a lover of the written word and always paid careful attention to text underlay and correct word stress. Hahn's devotion to words can be seen in the following quotation, speaking about composer Robert Schumann: "What a prodigiously literary soul is his! For me, obsessed as I am by the reunion of literature and music, such a quality is capital."<sup>21</sup> In the preface page to *Douze Rondels*, Hahn explains his intention to focus on prosody in a note to Louis Landry:

My dear friend,

We have had several conversations together in which we spoke about declamation and prosody in music. In this little collection I have decided to settle one of the most subtle problems; I attempted to prove the mysterious relationships which exist between natural inflection of the voice and harmony. Consequently, I chose the *rondel*, which is to say, a poem with a fixed form, when reading it one obeys certain necessary rules which are dictated by the sense of listening and by the moment.<sup>22</sup>

Hahn was intrigued with the music and poetry of the past, and so it is not unusual that he would choose the *rondel*, an archaic poetic verse form consisting of thirteen lines, two quatrains (four-line verses) and a quintain (five-line verse). The *rondel* rhyme scheme is as follows: ABba abAB abbaA. (Capital letters represent the refrains that usually repeat the

title of the poem.)

## Le Jour [Day]

All is delight when day breaks,  
In the flaming skies of dawn.  
On the flowering earth it beautifies,  
Immense joy returns.

Clearly silhouetted leaves  
Rustle loudly;  
All is delight when day breaks  
In the flaming skies of dawn.

The thatched cottage like the tower,  
Is tinged with light.  
The water murmurs, the flower  
adores,  
Birds sing, madly in love!  
All is delight when day breaks.

Théodore de Banville (1823-1891)

The piano plays an important role in Hahn's vocal music, often setting the mood through pictorial effects. Two examples from "Le Jour" illustrate this clearly. The song cycle begins with a stylized, neo-classical introduction, perhaps meant to depict sunrise. (Figure 1a, <[www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/](http://www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/)>).

A second example of pictorial writing occurs when with the sopranos and altos

**Andantino, presque allegretto (almost allegretto)**

Figure 1a. Reynaldo Hahn, "Le Jour," Introduction, mm. 1-16.

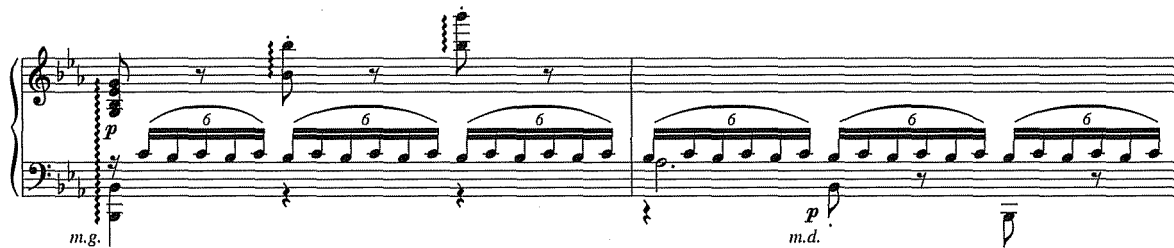


Figure 1b. Reynaldo Hahn, "Le Jour," murmuring water figuration.

sing the text *L'eau murmure* [water murmurs]. Sixteenth-note septuplets in the piano emulate the sound of water. (Figure 1b, <[www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/](http://www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/)>)

Hahn creates interest in "Le Jour" by alternating accompanied and unaccompanied choral sections, which are set apart by piano interludes. After the piano introduction, the choir sings the first quatrain unaccompanied, followed by a brief piano interlude that restates the opening motif of the introduction (Figure 2). This

technique draws greater attention to the text. "Le Jour" ends with a postlude that mirrors the introduction and highlights Hahn's interest in formal symmetry. The postlude effectively "ends the day."

"gardez le trait de la Fenetre"  
[Beware the arrow from the window]

Beware the arrow from the window  
Lovers who pass on the street near-by.  
For they will wound you swifter  
Than any bow or crossbow.

Neither look to the right or the left  
But lower your eyes:  
Beware the arrow from the window  
Lovers who pass on the street near-by.

If you do not have a good doctor,  
As soon as you are wounded,  
Commend your souls to God.  
Death awaits, call for the priest:  
Beware the arrow from the window.

Charles D'Orléans (1394-1465)

The sixth movement of the cycle is an excellent example of Hahn's skill at imitating the music of the past. From his earliest days Hahn admired and studied the Baroque and Classical composers, particularly Gluck, Rameau, and Mozart.<sup>23</sup> Their influence can be heard in his deliberately archaic style of composition in "gardez le trait de la Fenetre" and, to a lesser extent, in "Le Jour." The French had a particular affinity for this type of composition, which they called musical *pastiche*:

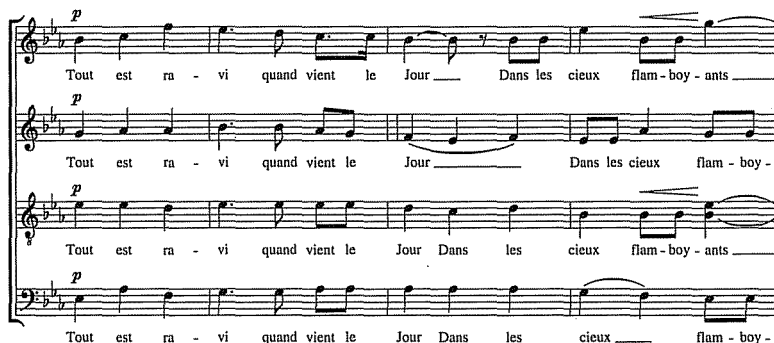


Figure 2. Reynaldo Hahn, "Le Jour," unaccompanied choral section.

There had long been a tradition in the composers of *mélodie*, (Gounod and Fauré were the greatest, but by no means the only examples) of matching early poetry with music in "madrigal" style evocative of earlier times . . . at the turn of the century, even a giant like Debussy was not above the use of archaic colour in his songs to suggest the fifteenth-century provenance of the words. Ravel too had an early success with his *Pavane pour une infante defunte*.<sup>24</sup>


Hahn inscribes "Mode Hypodorien" at the beginning of the score, as if to alert the musicians to the "antique" style. Throughout the song, the melody is passed from one voice part to another:

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Tenor

Gar - dez le trait de la fe -

**Allegretto**

nê - tre A - mants qui par ru - es pas - sez.

Figure 3. Reynaldo Hahn, "Gardez le trait de la fenêtre"

first the tenors, followed by sopranos, and then basses and altos, which gives the aural effect of dialogue between voices. Hahn's skill as a composer for the stage is evident in "gardez le trait de la Fenetre," which could pass for a courtly dance or scene music from a ballet. Johnson remarks, "A choreographer would enjoy the possibilities of this music in grouping and re-grouping a troupe of dancers costumed in tights and wimples"<sup>25</sup> (Figure 3, <[www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/](http://www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/)>).

The melody is stated first by the tenors and then answered by the sopranos at measure ten, this time embellished, in keeping with the "Baroque" style (Figure 4).

The first, sixth, and eleventh choral

movements create a framework for the cycle, which begins with day and closes with night, although "La Nuit" is not the last, but the second to the last movement in the cycle. The last movement, "Le souvenir d'avoir chantés" [The memory of singing] is a solo *mélodie* that ends the cycle on a somewhat melancholic tone. Hahn was only in his early twenties when he composed this cycle, but he was already disposed to looking back regretfully on a happier time in his life.

#### "La Nuit" [The Night]

Night  
We bless the sweet night,  
Whose cool kiss delivers us.  
Beneath its veils we live

Without worry and without noise.  
Devouring care flees,  
The perfumed air intoxicates us,  
We bless the sweet night  
Whose cool kiss delivers us.

Pale dreamer whom a god pursues,  
Rest, close your book.  
In the heavens as white as frost  
A stream of stars quivers and shines,  
We bless the sweet night.

Théodore de Banville (1823-1891)

10 *p*

Soprano

Car plus tôt en se - rez bles - sés Que de trait

14

d'arc ou d'ar - ba - lè - - - tre

Figure 4. Reynaldo Hahn, "Gardez," Soprano's embellished melody, mm. 10-17.

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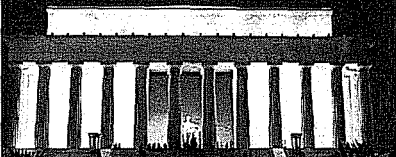
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**Très Calme**

*p*

A

Nous bé - nis - sons la dou - ce nuit dont le frais bai -

**Très Calme**

*pp m.g.*

S

Sous ses voi - les On se sent

A

ser nous dé - li - vre!

*p*

Figure 5. Reynaldo Hahn, "La Nuit," mm. 1-7.

Hahn chose an unusual voicing for "La Nuit"—soprano, alto (divided) and tenor (divided), perhaps to evoke a certain ethereal quality through the use of upper voices only. The second tenor part lies in a comfortable range and could possibly be assigned to the baritones, provided they are able to sing softly in their upper range. The song begins with an alto line that is characteristic of Hahn's style—a beautifully shaped melody that comfortably fits the natural rhythm of the text. The gentle, languid quality is created by a soft dynamic, a slow harmonic rhythm and long duration chords in the accompaniment (Figure 5,

<[www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/](http://www.acdaonline.org/cj/interactive/may2005/)>).

One of the hallmarks of Hahn's vocal writing is his careful attention to textual declamation. Often the vocal line reiterates one pitch in a speech-like manner (Figure 6). Hahn carried this technique to the extreme in movement number five of the *Rondels* cycle when the singer sings one note (an A) for the entire song, over changing chords in the accompaniment.

When setting the French language to music, Hahn was always careful to accurately reflect the inherent stresses of the language; for example, he usually notated exactly how the *e muet* (the unstressed e

S

Nous bé - nis - sons la dou - ce nuit Dont le frais bei -

Figure 6. Reynaldo Hahn, "La Nuit," textual declamation.

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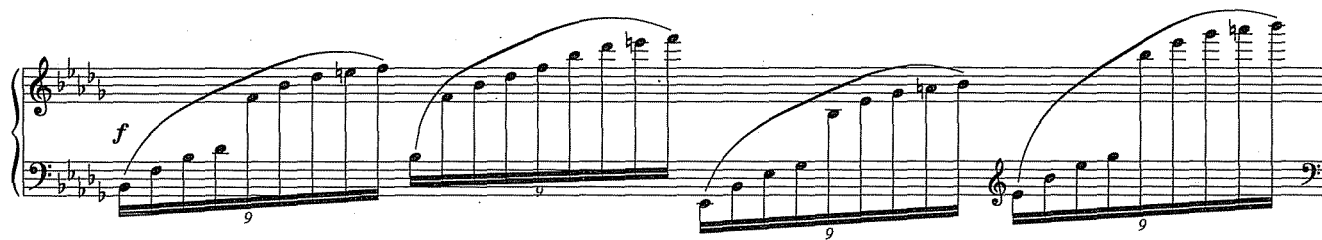


Figure 7. Reynaldo Hahn, "La Nuit," Arpeggios depicting the stars.

at the end of some French words) should be articulated, rather than leaving it to the performer's discretion.

"La Nuit" could be a lullaby were it not for one energetic section. Sixty-fourth note arpeggios in the piano disrupt the calm to depict the shimmering stars on the words, "Un flot d'astres frissone et luit" (A stream of stars quivers and shines). At that point, the piano moves away from supporting the singers to a more dominate, theatrical role of creating the appropriate mood change (Figure 7).

The work ends with a return of the poignant opening melodic motive, sung only by the sopranos. The word *nuit* (night) is emphasized by a D-flat major-minor seventh chord in the piano. Like many late Romantic composers, Hahn used chords in a coloristic way, more for their sensuous effect than for traditional harmonic function (Figure 8).

## Conclusion

Reynaldo Hahn's vocal compositions have been slowly gaining recognition since the late 1980s as musicians re-evaluate music of the late romantics. Schuh offers the following opinion of Hahn's work,

"[he is] . . . a master of solid craftsmanship, who deals with his art with both intelligence and elegance, safely guided by his stylistic instinct. In his best works, we find the most delicate culture of taste coupled with a subtle sense of proportion and distance-keeping."<sup>26</sup> Hahn's music has qualities that capture the essence of *la belle époque*, a time that is unfamiliar to many modern-day singers and conductors. Johnson states, "... his music evokes Paris, indeed a way of life, forever gone and, like Proust's world, retrievable only in precious moments where taste, sight or the sound of a musical phrase provoke the memory, or even perhaps the collective conscious."<sup>27</sup> The three choral movements from the *Douze Rondels* cycle are charming choral examples from that distant time.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Mélodies* is the French term for solo vocal compositions comparable to the German lied or English art song.

<sup>2</sup> Debra Spurgeon, *A Study of the Solo Vocal Works of Reynaldo Hahn With Analysis of Selected Mélodies*, Unpublished dissertation, The University of Oklahoma, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> "Le Jour" is the only separate choral movement currently published in the United States.

<sup>4</sup> Reynaldo Hahn, "Le Jour," edited by Debra Spurgeon, (Houston: Alliance Publications, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Hahn also wrote other choral pieces: four sacred songs for mixed chorus, seven mixed secular songs, twelve songs for treble chorus, two duets, a set of songs for solo quartet titled *Chansons et Madrigaux*, and a tableau for soprano soloist and choir titled *Pastorale de Noël*.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Gavoty, *Reynaldo Hahn: Le Musicien de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Bucket/Chastel, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> Jules Massenet, *My Recollections* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1970) p. 229.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years: The Arts in France 1885-1918*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Willi Schuh, "A la Recherche de Reynaldo Hahn," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (Zurich), 11 November 1973, no. 524.

<sup>10</sup> Gavoty, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Willi Schuh, "Zum Liedwerk Reynaldo Hahns," *Schweizer Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft*, ii (1974), p. 105.

<sup>12</sup> Schuh, "A la Recherche."

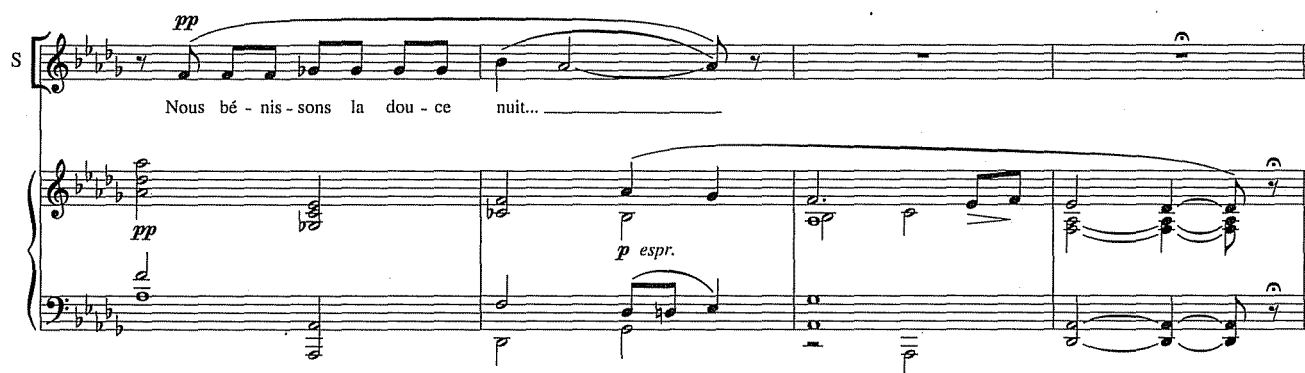


Figure 8. Reynaldo Hahn, "La Nuit," Final phrase.



- <sup>13</sup> Douglas Moore, *A Guide to Musical Styles* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1962), p. 256.
- <sup>14</sup> Reynaldo Hahn, *Thèmes Variés* (Paris: Janin, 1946), p. 195.
- <sup>15</sup> Theodore Baker, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1958), p. 929.
- <sup>16</sup> Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song*, trans. Winiford Radford (New York: W.W. Norton and Company 1978).
- <sup>17</sup> Schuh, "Zum Liedwerk," p. 102.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 103.
- <sup>19</sup> Jules Massenet, *Chanson des Bois d'Amaranthe*, edited by Richard Bloesch, *Chère Fleurs and Chantez* (Houston: Alliance Music Publications, 1999).
- <sup>20</sup> Linda Cuneo-Laurent, "The Performer as Catalyst: The Role of the Singer Jane Bathori in the Careers of Debussy, Ravel, Les Six, and Their Contemporaries in Paris 1904-1926." Unpublished PhD. Diss., New York University, 1982, p. 109.
- <sup>21</sup> Jacques Chailley, 1976 jacket notes, *Reynaldo Hahn: Mélodies*. Jean-Christophe Benoit, baritone. LP Recording (Paris: Disques Ades.) 1976.
- <sup>22</sup> Reynaldo Hahn, *Douze Rondels*, (Paris: Heugel, 1899).
- <sup>23</sup> Hahn edited ballets and operas for the collected works of Rameau.
- <sup>24</sup> Graham Johnson, compact disc notes, *Songs by Reynaldo Hahn*. (London: Hyperion Records Limited, 1996) p. 29.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 33.
- <sup>26</sup> Willi Schuh, "A la Recherche."
- <sup>27</sup> Johnson, p. 11.

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