

THE UNACCOMPANIED CHORAL MUSIC OF PIERRE VILLETTE:

A CONDUCTOR'S ANALYSIS

by

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# The Unaccompanied Choral Music of Pierre Villette: A Conductor's Analysis

Sean Michael Burton, D.M.A.

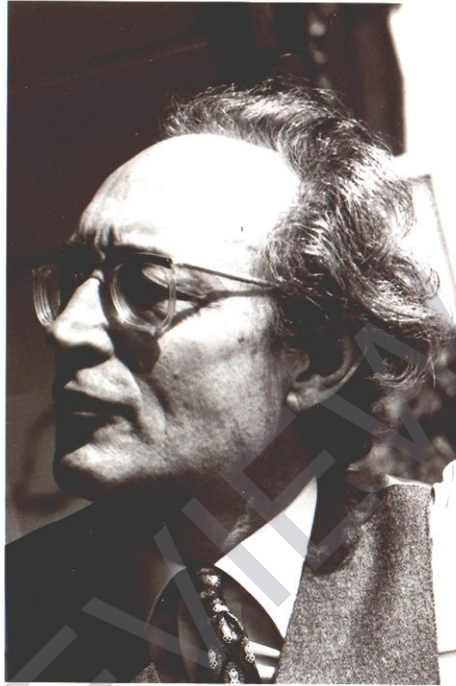
University of Nebraska, 2008

Advisor: Peter A. Eklund

The conservative compositional style of French composer Pierre Villette (1926-1998) furthers a lineage through the music of Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, Francis Poulenc, Maurice Duruflé, and Olivier Messiaen. His output of eighty-one compositions includes small-scale pieces for orchestra, chamber music, and choral works, including fifteen unaccompanied motets.

At present, Villette's music remains relatively unknown in the United States and even in his native France. This is surprising and unfortunate as all fifteen of the composer's unaccompanied choral works are commercially recorded and fourteen of the fifteen motets remain available in published editions which enjoy international distribution.

Based heavily on primary sources, this study examines all fifteen unaccompanied motets by Pierre Villette and includes documentation of the composer's personal attributes, discussion of text-music relationships, exploration of compositional style, and practical observations for performance. Beauty and accessibility unite in the choral music of Pierre Villette, making his motets relevant to myriad ensembles and a broad audience.



Pierre Marie Charles Villette

(1926-1998)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study represents the culmination of an international research effort. I cannot express enough, my sincere gratitude to Anne Villette (Pierre Villette's daughter) for her hospitality when I was in Paris and most especially to Josette Villette (Pierre Villette's widow) for allowing me unfettered access to her late husband's manuscripts, granting permission to reproduce the manuscript excerpts and dedication photograph, and answering countless questions before, during, and after my visit to France. Christopher Hyde of Hong Kong, China eagerly shared his sterling research undertaken at Oxford University. Matthew Berry of London, England and Alexander Jarrett of Bangor, Wales also contributed their infectious enthusiasm for Villette's music.

The genesis of this study lies with my friend and fellow Boston University alumnus Scott Allen Jarrett. Scott introduced me to a few motets by Pierre Villette and suggested I research the topic further on a hot day in Boston during the summer of 2004.

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## INTRODUCTION

The conservative compositional style of French composer Pierre Villette (1926-1998) furthers a lineage through the music of Gabriel Fauré, Claude Debussy, Francis Poulenc, Maurice Duruflé, and Olivier Messiaen. Though a classmate of Pierre Boulez at Le Conservatoire National Supérieure de Musique de Paris in the 1940s, Villette's approach to composition avoided the dominant French modernism of the middle-twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Villette combined retrospective influences ranging from Gregorian chant, similar to his teacher Maurice Duruflé, to the provocative harmonies of Francis Poulenc and Olivier Messiaen.<sup>2</sup> The resulting sound image runs the gamut from ethereal to feral.

Villette's lifelong health problems and primary occupation as an academic administrator, first as head of Le Conservatoire de Besançon (1957-67) and later as director of Le Conservatoire d'Aix-en-Provence (1967-87), necessitated a part-time career as composer.<sup>3</sup> His output of eighty-one compositions includes small-scale pieces for orchestra, chamber music, and choral works, including fifteen unaccompanied motets.

Though not particularly well-known in the United States, nor often performed in his native France, Villette's choral music enjoys regular performance throughout Germany, Japan, and most frequently in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> This assertion is confirmed by the variety of commercial recordings currently available by British choirs.

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Clampin. Notes to "Pierre Villette: Motets," The Holst Singers, London: Hyperion, 2006, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Private interview with Anne and Josette Villette, Paris, June 22, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Clampin, 2006, 4.

Pierre Villette is mentioned twice in *Grove Music Online* in his capacity as administrator in both Besançon and Aix-en-Provence,<sup>5</sup> but no separate article on the man as composer exists. Furthermore, he is not mentioned in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Music and Musicians* or Nick Strimple's *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*.

Besides two short articles by Englishmen Matthew Berry and Donald Hunt, relatively little scholarship on the music of Pierre Villette exists. One unpublished resource, Christopher Hyde's "Pierre Villette and Currents in French Choral Music of the Twentieth Century," offers many excellent insights with regards to Villette's compositional style. However, because of its broader focus on stylistic trends within the wider *a cappella* genre in France during the twentieth century and its overall brevity (less than fifty pages), Hyde's thesis cannot be considered nor was it intended to be a definitive study of Villette's unaccompanied choral music.

A detailed biography of Pierre Villette is currently in progress by Alexander Jarrett of Bangor University in Wales. In contrast to Jarrett's research, this study will include only a short biographical segment on the composer, functioning to elucidate the context in which Villette's music was composed. Based chiefly upon primary sources, this study represents the culmination of an international research effort encompassing the United States of America, France, and the United Kingdom.

An examination of all fifteen unaccompanied motets by Pierre Villette, including documentation of the composer's personal attributes, discussion of text-music relationships, exploration of his compositional style, and practical observations for

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<sup>5</sup> Per articles by Dobbins and Frémont cited in the Selected Bibliography.

performance, will reveal the quality and significance of these varied works. Beauty and accessibility unite in the choral music of Pierre Villette, making his motets relevant to myriad ensembles and a broad audience.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 1

### BIOGRAPHY

Born into a musical family on February 7, 1926, Pierre Marie Charles Villette received his primary artistic influence during his formative years from his father Henri Villette (1895-1948).<sup>6</sup> A skilled amateur musician, Henri Villette played piano, violin, organ, and viola, experimented with composition, and conducted a civic orchestra of some 200 musicians while operating a woodworking business on a full-time basis.

Villette's family resided in the city of Duclair, Seine-Maritime near Rouen, and from the age of six, Villette sang in the choir of Rouen's Saint Evode Cathedral. During Villette's training at Saint Evode Cathedral, he began to learn the organ from Jules Lambert and sang plainchant as well as a variety of choral music by major composers including Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Tomas Luis de Victoria, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and César Franck.<sup>7</sup>

During his teenage years, Villette followed the model of significant French composers from previous generations. He devoted himself seriously to the organ and worked as the organist of two small churches, Saint Thérèse de Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray and Saint Paul de Rouen.<sup>8</sup> By the age of fifteen, after approximately one year of commuting weekly to Paris for lessons in organ and harmony with Maurice Duruflé,<sup>9</sup> Villette gained successful entrance into the Paris Conservatory.

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<sup>6</sup> Denis Havard de la Montagne, 'Pierre Villette,' *Musica et Memoria* (Accessed 1 January 2008) <http://www.musimem.com/villette.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Villette, 2007.

Villette's education at the conservatory began in 1941. There he entered the composition class of Jean Gallon (1878-1959), the teacher of luminaries such as Olivier Messiaen, Maurice Duruflé, and Henri Dutilleux, the latter whose music Villette admired more than all of his contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> Regrettably, the Nazi occupation of Paris interrupted his studies and the young composer left France's capital city for "service agricole obligatoire" on his grandmother's farm in Normandy.<sup>11</sup> Following the 1944 liberation of Paris, he returned to the conservatory and continued his study of composition with Henri Büsser (1872-1973). Villette excelled in his studies at the conservatory, as illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>12</sup>

Year	Prize	Note
1943	First Certificate of Merit	
1945	Harmony, 1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Won with Pierre Boulez and Serge Baudo
1946	Fugue, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize	
1946	First Certificate of Merit in Music History	
1946	Counterpoint, 1 <sup>st</sup> Prize	Sole recipient
1949	Orchestral Conducting, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Prize	

**Figure 1: Pierre Villette's honors at Le Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris**

During the early 1940s, Villette attended several live performances of The Glenn Miller Orchestra. According to his wife Josette, these experiences profoundly impacted the young composer and strongly influenced Villette's compositional style.<sup>13</sup>

By 1948, Villette's studies were suspended again, this time due to the unexpected death of his father. His father's sudden passing forced the composer to return home and manage the family business. The strain of dealing with his father's affairs took a significant toll on Villette's health and he endured seven operations, culminating with the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Desplanches, 'Discours de reception de Pierre Villette prononce le 3 mai 1988', *Musica et Memoria* (Accessed 1 January 2008) [http://www.musimem.com/villette\\_academie\\_aix.htm](http://www.musimem.com/villette_academie_aix.htm).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Villette, 2007.

removal of a lung. Despite hardships of health, Villette's creativity persevered, winning the second *Grand Prix de Rome* in 1949 for his cantata *La Resurrection de Lazare*.

During the early 1950s, Villette spent long periods recuperating in the Alps, but still continued to compose, earning the *Prix Georges Bizet* in 1954. In the same year, while working as a church organist/choirmaster in Plateau d'Assy, he met his wife Josette and the two were married in 1956. In 1957, Villette's career in academic administration began in Besançon.

Throughout a distinguished thirty-year career as head of Le Conservatoire de Besançon from 1957-67 and director of Le Conservatoire d'Aix-en-Provence (currently Le Conservatoire Darius Milhaud) from 1967-87, Villette established himself as a fair, but strict administrator<sup>14</sup> as well as a passionate advocate for music education.<sup>15</sup> In 1987, Pierre Villette retired from academic life, devoting himself solely to the composer's craft, in his own words, "à la gloire du Seigneur" translated in English as "to the glory of God."<sup>16</sup>

Donald Hunt, the first choral conductor to champion Villette's works in England during his tenure as Organist and Master of the Choristers at Worcester Cathedral, and close friend of the Villette family, eloquently describes the composer's final years:

After his retirement, Villette continued to live in Aix-en-Provence, patiently cared for by his devoted wife [sic] as his health deteriorated. He continued to compose, but the works were now almost all on a smaller scale, mostly devoted to instrumental offerings, especially for the piano. But inevitably there were more works for the church, as this was always a high priority for him; throughout his life he had a strong faith, and he gained so much inspiration from the language of the traditional Catholic liturgy, hence an almost continuous supply of motets, many of which he would not have heard sung in his lifetime.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Villette, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Clampin, 2006, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Desplanches, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Hunt. "Pierre Villette," *The Organ*, No. 322, Nov. 2002-Feb. 2003, 16.

Pierre Villette departed this earth on March 6, 1998. Fondly remembered by his family and friends as a devout Catholic, he is no less memorable for his kindness and generosity to students, witty sense of humor, and artistic sensitivity,<sup>18</sup> the characteristic which most inspires this study.

PREVIEW

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<sup>18</sup> Villette, 2007.

## CHAPTER 2

## ANALYSIS OF THE EARLY MOTETS, 1944-1960

Villette's unaccompanied motets fall into three chronological periods of composition. The early period, 1944-60, produced seven works for mixed chorus (Figure 2).<sup>19</sup> The second period, 1983-91, generated Villette's most extended works: *Attende, Domine* (1983) and *Inviolata* (1991), as well as the 1983 *O magnum mysterium*, a less complicated motet in comparison to the other two. The late years, 1992-95, function primarily as a return to simplicity. These years produced four works for mixed chorus: *O quam amabilis es*, *Notre Père d'Aix*, *Jesu, dulcis Memoria*, and *Panis angelicus*. The only exception to this more restrained compositional style is Villette's lone contribution to the treble choir literature, an intricate setting of *O quam suavis est* (1993).

Title	Opus	Year	2008 Publisher
<i>Ave verum</i>	3	1944	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc
<i>Salve Regina</i>	5	1944	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc
<i>O Salutaris hostia</i>	21	1954	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc
<i>Hymne à la Vierge</i>	24	1955	Éditions Durand
<i>O Sacrum convivium</i>	27	1959	Heugel/Alphonse Leduc
<i>Strophes Polyphoniques pour le Veni Creator</i>	28	1959	Éditions À Cœur Joie
<i>Adoro te</i>	31	1960	Éditions Durand
<i>Attende, Domine</i>	45	1983	United Music Publishers
<i>O magnum mysterium</i>	53	1983	Éditions Durand
<i>Inviolata</i>	66	1991	United Music Publishers
<i>O quam amabilis es</i>	71	1992	United Music Publishers
<i>Notre Père d'Aix</i>	75	1992	Édition Philippe Caillard
<i>O quam suavis est</i>	76	1993	Éditions À Cœur Joie
<i>Jesu, dulcis Memoria</i>	78	1994	United Music Publishers
<i>Panis angelicus</i>	80	1995	United Music Publishers

Figure 2: Pierre Villette's unaccompanied choral works

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Villette. *Catalogue des Oeuvres de Pierre Villette*. Unpublished manuscript, 1995.

### *Ave verum*, Op. 3

Following the example of such esteemed French composers as Charles-François Gounod, César Franck, Gabriel Fauré, and Camille Saint-Saëns, Villette completed his setting of *Ave verum* on April 9, 1944,<sup>20</sup> at the age of eighteen. Villette scored *Ave verum* for unaccompanied mixed chorus, dedicating it to his cousin Canon Roland Delestre<sup>21</sup> as follows: “à Monseigneur le Chanoine DELESTRE, Maître de Chapelle de la Cathédrale de Rouen.”<sup>22</sup>

Villette cast *Ave verum* in five sections, congruent with the structure of the original Latin text, a short Eucharistic hymn whose authorship is thought to be by either Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) or Pope Innocent IV (1243-1254).<sup>23</sup> Jeffers states: “The text of *Ave verum Corpus* commemorates Christ’s redemptive Sacrifice, and especially focuses on the great symbol of Baptism: the pouring forth of water from his pierced side.”<sup>24</sup> Jeffers’ translation of *Ave verum Corpus* is as follows:

Ave verum Corpus, natum de Maria Virgine:	Hail, true Body, born of the Virgin Mary,
Vere passum, immolatum in cruce pro homine:	Who has truly suffered, was sacrificed on the cross for mortals,
Cujus latus perforatum, unda fluxit sanguine:	Whose side was pierced, whence flowed water and blood:
Esto nobis praegustatum in mortis examine.	Be for us a foretaste (of heaven) during our final examining.
O Jesu dulcis, O Jesu pie, O Jesu Fili Mariae, miserere mei. Amen.	O Jesu sweet, O Jesu pure, O Jesu, Son of Mary, have mercy upon me. Amen.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Villette. *Ave verum*. Manuscript, 1944.

<sup>21</sup> Villette, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Villette. *Ave verum*. Paris: Éditions Ouvrières/Heugel/Alphonse Leduc, 1955.

<sup>23</sup> Ron Jeffers. *Translations and Annotations of Choral Repertoire Volume I: Sacred Latin Texts*. Corvallis, OR: Earthsongs, 1988, 105.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 105.

Two textual omissions in Villette's *Ave verum* warrant exploration. Villette avoids setting the words "O Jesu pie" and "miserere mei, Amen" in his composition. Instead, he repeats the words "O Jesu dulcis" twice (first in the soprano and alto voices, then in the tenor and bass voices) and moves forward with an outburst on the text "O Jesu fili Mariae" before concluding the motet with the text "Tu nobis miserere" (Figure 4).

Villette's decision to repeat "O Jesu dulcis" in hushed tones of the women's and men's voices, without setting the words "O Jesu pie" and insertion of the text "Tu nobis miserere," meaning "you have mercy upon us" instead of "miserere mei, Amen," meaning "have mercy upon me, so be it," may function as a manifestation of the composer's personal faith. With this alteration of text, perhaps Villette implores God to make his/her spiritual presence known during a period of world conflict.

Mediant harmonic relationships dominate Villette's tonal aesthetic, although the presence of pervasive unresolved dissonance throughout *Ave verum* resists conventional analysis solely with Roman numerals. Nonetheless, Villette clearly delineates the motet's five-part structure with fermatas at each major cadence point and the composer's avoidance of parallel fifths, as in measures 5-6 (Figure 3), concurs with established conventions of common practice voice leading.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 3: Hyde's reduction of *Ave verum*, mm. 5-6

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Hyde. "Pierre Villette and Currents in French Choral Music of the Twentieth Century." Unpublished thesis, Oxford University, 2006, 26.

The image shows a musical score for 'Ave verum' by Heugel/Alphonse Leduc, 1955. The score is in French and consists of three systems of staves with vocal and piano parts. The first system is marked 'Plus lent' and 'pp'. The second system is marked 'Très large'. The third system is marked 'Très rall' and 'bis'. The lyrics are in French and include 'O Je-su dul-cis', 'O Je-su fi-li Ma-ri-æ', and 'Tu no-bis mi-se-re-re'.

Figure 4: *Ave verum*, mm. 32-41, Heugel/Alphonse Leduc, 1955

Christopher Hyde cites jazz as a speculative but significant harmonic feature of Villette's compositional style,<sup>26</sup> an assertion confirmed by Villette's widow Josette and

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 34.

daughter Anne.<sup>27</sup> A minor example of this influence occurs with the presence of a thirteenth chord in second inversion found in measures 37 and 38 of *Ave verum* (Figure 5).<sup>28</sup>



Figure 5: Hyde's reduction of *Ave verum*, mm. 37-38

A final note concerning the harmonic attributes of *Ave verum* concerns Villette's release of tension in the last three measures of the piece, concluding the work on an enhanced yet unresolved chord (D Major with an added sixth). This manner of conclusion became a trademark for Villette's *a cappella* choral music, as evidenced in Figure 6.<sup>29</sup>

Work	Last Chord
<i>Ave verum</i>	I +6
<i>O Salutaris hostia</i>	I 9 +6
<i>Hymne à la Vierge</i>	I (but with +4 → 5 appoggiatura)
<i>O Sacrum convivium</i>	I -7 -3 -5
<i>O magnum mysterium</i>	I +6
<i>Inviolata</i>	I +11
<i>O quam amabilis es</i>	I +7 9
<i>Notre Père d'Aix</i>	I 9
<i>O quam suavis est</i>	I +7 9 +11
<i>Panis angelicus</i>	I +7 9

Figure 6: Enhanced and/or unresolved conclusions in Villette's unaccompanied choral works

Although Villette ultimately chose to conclude *Ave verum* with an unresolved chord, this was not his original intent. When viewing the manuscript of *Ave verum*, this

<sup>27</sup> Villette, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Hyde, 2006, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 31.

author discovered the initial ending to be a D Major chord in root position (Figure 7).

At some point prior to the 1955 publication of *Ave verum* with Éditions Ouvrières, Villette changed his mind and adopted the unresolved conclusion. This unresolved conclusion would become a theme for fully two-thirds of the composer's unaccompanied choral works.

PREVIEW