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PREVIEW

THE SONGS OF GUSTAVE CHARPENTIER

by

Ruth I. Foley

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

Under the Supervision of Professor Donna Harler-Smith

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2000

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PREVIEW

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THE SONGS OF GUSTAVE CHARPENTIER

BY

RUTH FOLEY

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE:

APPROVED

DATE

Signature

DONNA HARLER-SMITH, Chair

Typed Name

Signature

RANDALL SNYDER

Typed Name

Signature

JOSEPH KRAUS

Typed Name

Signature

GLENN NIERMAN

Typed Name

Signature

Typed Name

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GRADUATE COLLEGE  
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# THE SONGS OF GUSTAVE CHARPENTIER

Ruth I. Foley, D.M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2000

Advisor: Donna Harler-Smith

Gustave Charpentier, 1860-1956, is best remembered for his opera, Louise, which premièred in 1900 and received its thousandth performance shortly after his death. As a young man, Charpentier was a talented student at the Conservatoire de Paris, but was also remembered as a radical. He studied composition under Massenet, and at the age of 27 won the "Grand Prix de Rome" for his cantata, Didon. Charpentier loved residing in the district of Paris called Montmartre, where he mixed with bohemians, poets, anarchists, and artists. Through his background he formulated individual thinking and a unique musical style.

Charpentier's skill as a song-writer is his ability to give dramatic and pictorial vividness to poetry through the full use of harmonic resources available to late nineteenth-century composers. He incorporates a great deal of chromatic freedom into his writing, while remaining within a tonal framework. Although Charpentier wasn't an innovator in this genre, his songs exhibit a freedom of expression

that gives them a trademark of individuality.

Many of Charpentier's songs included chorus parts and orchestra, and were intended for large gatherings, rather than soloist and accompanist in a drawing room setting. In doing so, Charpentier embarked on an individual pathway, and was valiant in his political and artistic endeavors by writing for "le Peuple" (the people).

Charpentier composed some 20 songs in three groups; Poèmes chantés, Les Fleurs du Mal, and Impressions Fausses between the years 1885 and 1895. Unfortunately, his songs have been too under-rated, and sadly, even remain obscure.

The purpose of this document is to provide justification for Gustave Charpentier's songs to be recognized as having artistic merit through musical enhancement of the poetry. This document provides a background of the composer, the songs, the poets and symbolist poetry. The songs are grouped together according to poet; each poem is briefly analyzed for thematic, figurative, and rhetorical content; and each song is extensively analyzed for musical style and content.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter One</b>	
Charpentier's Life	1
Charpentier's Major Works	14
 <b>Chapter Two</b>	
Gustave Charpentier - Songs	33
Charpentier Songs - Publications	41
The Poets of Gustave Charpentier's Songs	46
 <b>Chapter Three</b>	
Charpentier and Baudelaire	58
La Musique	58
La cloche fêlée	74
Parfum exotique	87
Les Yeux de Berthe	98
Le Jet d'eau	111
La Mort des amants	126
L'Invitation au voyage	139
 <b>Chapter Four</b>	
Charpentier and Verlaine	152
Chanson d'automne	152
Les Chevaux de bois	163
La Veillée rouge	177
La Ronde des compagnons	189
Sérénade à Watteau	205
 <b>Chapter Five</b>	
Charpentier and Mauclair	217
Les Trois Sorcières	217
Complainte	229
La Chanson du chemin	244
 <b>Chapter Six</b>	
Charpentier and Blémond, Puech, Méry, Vanor, Balzac	262
Prière	262
A une fille de Capri	270
A Mules	281
Allégorie	292
La Petite Frileuse	307



<b>Conclusion</b>	321
<b>Works Consulted</b>	326
<b>Appendix A (Poetry)</b>	335

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER ONE

### Charpentier's Life

Gustave Charpentier was born on June 25, 1860 in the village of Dieuze, Lorraine, near the German border in France. His father was a baker by trade and also an amateur musician who loved to practice the violin, French horn, and flute whenever time permitted. The young Gustave thus learned to appreciate music, and his biographers say that he gained a command of solfège about the same time that he learned to talk.<sup>1</sup>

In 1871, after the Franco-Prussian war broke out, the annexation of Lorraine by the Germans caused the residents

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1 To this end the reader is referred to:

Jean Poueigh [Octave Séré], Musiciens français d'aujourd'hui (Paris: Mercure de France, 1931) 99.

Marc Delmas, Gustave Charpentier et le lyrisme français (Paris: Delagrave, 1934) 8-9.

of Dieuze to flee to the northern textile center of Tourcoing, close to the Belgian border. At the age of eleven, Gustave received his first formal lessons from this town's exceptional music maestro, Stappen, and after five months of study, he was skilled enough to play the violin in a municipal orchestra where he was introduced to many of the great classics, such as "Fidelio, Orfeo, Rienzi, and L'Etoile du nord".<sup>2</sup>

From 1875-1879 Gustave was employed in a knitting mill and worked his way up from weaver to bookkeeper by the age of eighteen. In his spare time he practiced the clarinet and violin, and worked at developing a music society which encouraged his co-workers to share his zeal for musical enrichment. The owner of the mill, Albert Lorthiois, was so impressed when he came upon an impromptu performance which Gustave had set up in one of the workshops, that he decided to sponsor his career by paying for his lessons if Gustave would teach him to play the violin in return.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen O'Donnell-Hoover, "Gustave Charpentier" Musical Quarterly, 25 (1939) 336.

<sup>3</sup> André Himonet, 'Louise' de G. Charpentier (Paris: Delaplane, 1922) 7.

At the nearby Conservatory of Lille, Gustave studied violin with M. Martin and harmony with M. Lecoq. After only a few months of instruction there, he won a "prix d'honneur" which again impressed Lorthiois, who then persuaded the municipal council of Tourcoing to set up a fund of 1200 francs per year for study at the prestigious Conservatoire de Paris.<sup>4</sup> Gustave was elated upon hearing the news and exclaimed to his mother, whom he always loved dearly, "Maman, la ville nous a donné 600 francs chacun pour vivre à Paris"! (Mama, the city has given each of us 600 francs so that we can live in Paris!).<sup>5</sup>

In 1881, mother and son moved to the Montmartre district of Paris and Gustave enrolled at the Paris Conservatory. Gustave was popular amongst his friends, but not with his teachers because of his penchant for being a prankster and for not taking his studies seriously. He was

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<sup>4</sup> Hugues Imbert, Médailleurs contemporains (Paris: Fischbacher, 1902) 142.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Desternes, liner notes: "Gustave Charpentier" 'Louise'; a musical romance in four acts, LP, Epic, 1956.

known to insert snippets of popular songs into his theory exercises, and one time he handed in an assignment based on the theme of "J'ai du bon tabac" (I've got some good tobacco) which failed to impress Massart who dismissed him from the conservatory.<sup>6</sup> It appeared that Massart had a personal vendetta against him, because he made a claim that Charpentier had no talent and would never have a future in music.<sup>7</sup>

After a short stint in the military and a brief time of working as an itinerant violinist in Paris, Charpentier re-entered the Conservatory in 1885, this time with more serious intentions. He studied harmony with Emile Pessard, who awarded him a certificate of merit, and composition with Jules Massenet, who became his mentor and friend.<sup>8</sup>

In his memoirs, Massenet described Charpentier as "one

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Landormy, La Musique française après Debussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 196.

<sup>7</sup> Gustave Charpentier, Gustave Charpentier: Lettres inédites à ses parents. La Vie quotidienne d'un élève du Conservatoire, 1879-1887, éd. Françoise Andrieux (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 28.

<sup>8</sup> Marc Delmas, Gustave Charpentier et le lyrisme français (Paris: Delagrave, 1931) 12.

who always wanted to shock", and it was Massenet who convinced him to be more natural in his writing.<sup>9</sup> Massenet also told Charpentier that he held the torch for continuing the art of French lyricism. He said: "Gustave Charpentier, mon élève, mon fils spirituel, incarnera pour vous ce que doit être et ce que sera toujours le lyrisme français." (Gustave Charpentier, my student, my spiritual son, will personify what should be and what always will be; French lyricism.)<sup>10</sup>

While in Paris, Charpentier developed a passion for the district of Montmartre, the topographical and artistic high-point of Paris, where bohemians, laborers and students mixed freely, and where Charpentier chose to live for most of his adult life. He quickly adopted the characteristic demeanor of Bohemian life as well as a distaste for authority. He wore a large necktie and a wide-brimmed felt hat, had long hair, a pointed beard and would often be seen smoking a pipe

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Langhorn Smith, "Charpentier, Gustave," The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992) 822.

<sup>10</sup> Marc Delmas Gustave Charpentier et le lyrisme français (Paris: Delagrave, 1931) 7.

and walking the streets at night in a dark cape.<sup>11</sup> As an artist, Charpentier was anti-intellectual and proclaimed that he was an "instinctive" musician rather than an imitator.<sup>12</sup>

After two years of study at the Paris Conservatory, Charpentier won the prestigious and coveted "Grand Prix de Rome" in 1887 for his composition of the cantata, Didon. Members of the jury were astonished by the superiority, ease of technique, and dramatic expression that his work displayed. The vote for his winning the competition was only one short of unanimous.<sup>13</sup>

Charpentier's strong attachment for Montmartre was so great, that when it was time to leave for Rome he went back home from the railroad station three times before his friends finally convinced him to board the train.<sup>14</sup> His

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<sup>11</sup> André Himonet, 'Louise' de G. Charpentier (Paris: Delaplane, 1922) 11.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Hill, Modern French Music (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924) 175.

<sup>13</sup> André Himonet, 'Louise' de G. Charpentier (Paris: Delaplane, 1922) 7.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Myers, liner notes, Louise, LP, Columbia, 1976.

love for Paris remained with him once he settled in Rome, and like Debussy before him, he managed to escape back to Paris on more than one occasion. At one time, Massenet discovered him near the Eiffel Tower and sent him back to Rome.<sup>15</sup>

From 1888 to 1890 Charpentier's home was at the Villa de Médicis in Rome, the place of reward for all "Prix de Rome" recipients. It was during this time that Charpentier sketched and elaborated the nucleus of his life's most successful works: the orchestral suite, Impressions d'Italie; his symphony-drama, Vie du Poète; and the first act of his famous opera, Louise.<sup>16</sup>

There is some basis for describing Charpentier as a descendent of Massenet, especially in his method of thematic development and in his manipulation of orchestral timbres. There are also elements of Gounod's fluid and expressive style and some shades of Chabrier's dissonance in his

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Landormy, La musique française après Debussy (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) 197.

<sup>16</sup> Julien Tiersot, Un demi-siècle de musique française 1870-1919 (Paris: Librairie Felix Alcan) 201.



writing.<sup>17</sup> Other critics see a Wagnerian influence in Charpentier's writing, such as his leitmotiv technique, his choice of chord progressions, his lack of melody, and his concept of opera as a musical novel.<sup>18</sup> Many different musical elements influenced Charpentier, even though he did not ascribe to any particular school.

Charpentier was a proponent of "naturalisme" in opera, representing the French equivalent of "verismo" before the staging of works by Puccini, Mascagni and Leoncavallo. (La Bohème was staged in Paris in 1898, Cavalleria Rusticana in 1892, while Louise was conceived in 1887). Charpentier was also impressed with Berlioz, who awakened a sense of the

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Orledge, "Charpentier, Gustave," New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (New York: Macmillan, 1981) 161.

Arthur Elson, Modern Composers of Europe, (Boston: The Page Company, 1922) 153.

<sup>18</sup> Jane F. Fulcher, "Charpentier's Operatic 'Roman Musical' as read in the wake of the Dreyfus affair," Nineteenth Century Music 16. 2 (1992) 170.

"picturesque and the unexpected within him."<sup>19</sup> This too, may have influenced Charpentier, as most of his works have contemporary pictorial or literary basis. In addition, Charpentier's greatest skill is in making these images come to life.

Robert Orledge states that Charpentier's main talents lie in his "ingenuous metamorphosis of simple thematic material and in his vivid and effective orchestration."<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is his individuality which makes him unique, and as one critic points out, Charpentier is one of the most solitary and original figures among contemporary French musicians of his time.<sup>21</sup>

George Polacco, who conducted both of Charpentier's

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Orledge, "Charpentier Gustave," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980) 161. The reader may also consult:

Robert Orledge, "Charpentier, Gustave," New Oxford Dictionary of Music, ed. Denis Arnold (Oxford: Oxford U Press, 1983) 357.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Orledge, "Charpentier, Gustave," New American Dictionary of Music (New York: Dutton, 1991) 161.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Hill, Modern French Music (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924) 172.

operas; Louise and its sequel, Julien at the Metropolitan Opera, and who knew Charpentier personally, describes him fondly as a socialist, a dreamer, a poet, and a musician, who stands apart because he imbues his philosophy, his dreams and his ideals into his writing. Charpentier also stands apart because no other musician he knows has drawn so deep an inspiration from life around him. Charpentier's descriptive music and colorful impressions reflect a remarkable sympathy with the lives of the poor working class. He believes that the real greatness of Charpentier lies in his fine sensibilities and subtle understanding of human nature, combined with genius as a musician, and intellect as a philosopher.<sup>22</sup>

Charpentier's endeavors as a philanthropist are well documented, and he was nicknamed the patron saint of the working girl.<sup>23</sup> It was his goal to assist the working class' appreciation of music and to involve as many people as possible in musical endeavors. On many occasions he

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<sup>22</sup> Alice Rohe, "An intimate view of Charpentier," The Opera Magazine (March, 1914) 29-30.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Desternes, liner notes, 'Louise'; a musical romance in four acts, LP, Epic, 1956.

would say, "The money I earned with Louise comes back to Louise".<sup>24</sup>

In 1900, Charpentier founded an organization called "L'Oeuvre de Mimi Pinson", named after one of Alfred de Musset's heroines, which provided free admission to working girls in Paris to attend the opera.<sup>25</sup> In 1902 he extended his generosity to found the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson, where working class girls of Paris were given free lessons in music, art and classical dance.<sup>26</sup> Charpentier popularized this institution, which lasted until 1939, by promoting open-air music festivals throughout France. He told them that someday he would build a theatre for them which would be as gay as their laughter, as sunny as their

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<sup>24</sup>Mary Ellen Poole, "Gustave Charpentier and the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson," Nineteenth Century Music 20. 3 (1997) 251.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Huebner, "Between Anarchism and the Box Office: Gustave Charpentier's 'Louise' " Nineteenth Century Music 19. 2 (1995) 144.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Ellen Poole, "Gustave Charpentier and the Conservatoire Populaire de Mimi Pinson," Nineteenth Century Music 20. 3 (1997) 231.

faces and as dramatic as their fates.<sup>27</sup> Throughout his life, Charpentier held strongly to the belief that musical enrichment holds the key to the emancipation of the working class.

Charpentier's open-air festival "Le Couronnement de la Muse" (The Crowning of the Muse), which was also part of the third act of Louise, became a tradition in France after 1898. Every spring in Paris and other major cities in France, a huge festival was organized under his guidance and patronage, and the people would choose one of the working girls to be crowned as their prodigy. "Le Couronnement de la Muse" is a mime in which Beauty crowns the Muse and the poets bring their adoration. Suffering laments the lot of Humanity, but the Muse of Happiness comes and sinks at her feet in adoration. An allegorical procession of workmen, teachers and students follows.<sup>28</sup>

For his achievements in music and his contribution to

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<sup>27</sup> H.E. Philips "Friend of the working girl," Opera News 35. 19 (1971) 30.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Elson, Modern Composers of Europe, (Boston: The Page Co., 1922) 151.

the arts, Charpentier was named Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur in August of 1900; Officier de la Légion d'honneur in 1922; and finally Commandeur de la Légion d'honneur in 1930. He was also elected to the Académie de Beaux Arts, replacing Massenet after his death in 1912.<sup>29</sup>

Charpentier remained devoted to the district of Montmartre in Paris for all of his adult life. At the age of ninety-one, he was invited to conduct some of his music for a special concert in front of the Sacré-Coeur cathedral. Charpentier died in 1956, only a few months before the thousandth performance of Louise at the Opéra Comique in Paris.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Françoise Andrieux, éd., Gustave Charpentier: Lettres inédites à ses parents. La Vie quotidienne d'un élève de Conservatoire 1879-1887 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 115.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Myers, liner notes, Louise, CD, Sony Classical, 1990.

## Charpentier's Major Works

### Didon

Charpentier's "Prix de Rome" composition of 1887 was the "scène lyrique", Didon, which he dedicated to Massenet. According to friend and critic, Marc Delmas, this piece stands out because of its dramatic sincerity, its perfect declamation, and its magnificent ending which undoubtedly influenced the jury's decision.<sup>31</sup> Didon was performed at the Colonne concerts in Paris, in Brussels, and then in Tourcoing several months later where Charpentier received a standing ovation.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, like so many other "Prix de Rome" compositions, the work is not performed today, although it is published and the score suggests that it may bear revival.<sup>33</sup>

Didon is based on the Virgilian theme of Dido, and its

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<sup>31</sup> Marc Delmas, Gustave Charpentier et le lyrisme français (Paris: Delagrave, 1931) 13.

<sup>32</sup> André Himonet, 'Louise' de G. Charpentier (Paris: Delaplane, 1922) 7.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Porter, liner notes, Louise, LP, Angel, 1977.

text is by Augé de Lassus. It is scored for orchestra, solos and chorus, and is of about 30 minutes duration. It is interesting to note that Didon contains the famous rising arpeggio that is the leitmotiv in Louise, which symbolically expresses her aroused sensuality or "l'élan amoureux".<sup>34</sup>

### Impressions d'Italie

Charpentier's Impressions d'Italie, composed in 1890, is a five-movement work, based on picturesque scenes from the Villa Medici and surrounding areas of Rome. Martin Cooper points out that Charpentier was probably inspired by other works composed there, such as Berlioz's Harold in Italy, and Bizet's Roma. He was also likely inspired by Massenet, who composed works with pictorial association during the 1870's, such as Scènes hongroises, Scènes dramatiques and Scènes pictoresques, and it would be quite fitting for his student to continue in this tradition.<sup>35</sup>

Charpentier's work was first performed at the Colonne

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<sup>34</sup> Harvey Philips, "Friend of the working girl," Opera News 35.19 (1971) 30.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Cooper, liner notes, Charpentier 'Impressions d'Italie', LP, London, 1960.