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Third-rater of the first rate

The songs of Reynaldo Hahn are haunting and evocative. They deserve to be better-known

Of all the injustices meted out by the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* when it was first published in 1980, few were as ill-deserved as the minimal space, amounting to little more than a column of text, accorded to Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947), surely the most lovable composer of third-rate music who ever lived. There is nothing wrong, to be clear, in writing or enjoying third-rate music; indeed there are times when it is the only music that will do. The *Belle Epoque* (that easeful period of French cultural life under the Third Republic, identified as a golden age only in the retrospect of the Great War) breathed a spirit that is especially well-suited to the music of its also-rans. The preservation in sound of this era was achieved above all through the dazzling early promise, remarkable facility and exquisite taste of Hahn. Happily for the composer, *Grove*'s omission has been repaired over many years by Graham Johnson, whose exploration of the byways of French song matches his especial contribution to the study of German Lieder. Both in concert and the recording studio, Johnson has championed Hahn and gained new converts to this most endearing of song-writers.

Born in Caracas of a Venezuelan mother and German-Jewish father, Hahn arrived with his family in Paris at the age of three. At five, he was playing proficiently; by eight he was composing. At ten, he was studying at the Paris Conservatoire alongside Ravel, and received composition lessons from Gounod and Massenet. He found his voice early. For a long time, Hahn's reputation rested on the song which he wrote at the age of 13, *"Si mes vers avaient des ailes"*, to a text by Victor Hugo. No precocious composition, not even the early chamber works of Mendelssohn, is quite as astonishing as this work, written by one barely adolescent. As Johnson has said, "The distinguishing marks of Hahn's style are all there: an accompaniment which undulates in the background like the slow unfurling of a skein of sumptuous material, a background of seemingly little import which nevertheless shapes the melody as if the accompanist wielded the lightest of hands on a potter's wheel; a vocal line which is derived from the intimacy of speech but which contains in it the seeds of a wonderful melody truly to be sung…". To which one would only add that the word-setting is entirely natural, and whilst it appears to place the text in the foreground, the art of the piece lies in the fact that words and music are held in perfect equipoise.

Amid many imperfect verses, the poet Verlaine wrote one or two immortal expressions of the French language. Perhaps the most haunting is *"Clair de Lune"*, which begins (untranslatably) "*Votre âme est un paysage choisi/ Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques*." It is a pity that Hahn, unlike Fauré and (in a different way) Debussy, never set this poem, but the poet himself was able to listen to Hahn's settings of his verse, at Alphonse Daudet's house in 1893—and he was moved to tears. One of the songs he heard, and one of Hahn's finest, is *"L'Heure Exquise"*. The poem itself offers an attractive if formulaic description of evening, a rising moon, the outlines of a willow tree and their reflection in water. In Hahn's poem, they become something special. A simple arpeggiated accompaniment is perfectly calibrated to bring the best out of the verse, while Hahn knows exactly when and how to alter the harmony so as to make us attend yet more carefully to the words (as in the last stanza, where the poet speaks of *"Un vaste et tendre appaisement/Semble descendre du firmament/Que l'astre irise*").

"La Barcheta" must be one of the most evocative strophic songs ever written. It was composed as part of Hahn's *Venezia* cycle. The text is Venetian dialect, the occasion an intended seduction on board a gondola at night, and each of the three verses, set to an identical melody over a hypnotic accompaniment that conveys the dark waters of the lagoon, ends with a wordless, extended sigh which is a mingling of suppressed passion and an overpowering sense of the beauty and ephemerality of the moment. Part of the magic consists in the fact that the pianist mostly plays in 2/4 time, while the singer sings in a free 6/8, but for those three treasurable "Ah!"s the performers converge in a shared 3/4 tempo. Even happier is the thought that this song was inspired by the time Hahn spent as a young man in Venice with his then lover, Marcel Proust—Proust who wrote, "When I went to Venice, my dream became my address." The author depicted Hahn as Jean Santeuil in his unfinished novel of that name (1895-1899), and though his maturer writing mercilessly anatomises the bitterness and estrangement of those who have fallen out of love, it is a testament to the freshness of their relationship and no doubt also to Hahn's winning personality that Proust and he remained friends for the rest of the novelist's life.

Although Hahn lived longer in the 20th century than in the 19th, Graham Johnson is right to have written that there is a decided feeling of anti-climax in the later part of his life. He kept a diary, which recorded his extensive travels, including encounters with the British royal family. He conducted, and accompanied singers of whom he approved, but in his compositions he made no attempt to compete with the avant-garde, and apart from the occasional arresting piece of chamber music, such as the Piano Quintet, retreated into the composition of operetta, and other more or less imitative music. When he explained one such work to a daughter of Queen Victoria, she remarked: "I see, you mean—a *pistache*." The wonderful *"A Chloris"*, written in 1913, is a setting of a 17th-century text by Théophile de Viau, in which all of Hahn's skill as a composer of pastiche (and perhaps sympathy for a fellow homosexual) is concentrated in a song of melancholic economy. There is an absolute seriousness in the composer's adoption of the style of a Baroque air, complete with descending bass line (borrowed, in anticipation of Procol Harum, from Bach) and eloquent turns in the piano. The concept of pastiche has a bad press these days, but the exercise can be done well or badly or, as here, superbly—so as to create a song which, once heard, is never forgotten.

Hahn lived for too long—he suffered the indignity of having to leave Paris during the Nazi occupation, though he was appointed the first director of the Paris Opera after the war, shortly before his death. Like no other composer, he evokes the salons of late 19th-century Paris, and it is fitting that the great literary chronicler of that period esteemed him so highly. As Proust wrote: "When he takes his place at the piano, with a cigarette in the corner of his mouth, everyone is quiet and gathers round to listen . . . Thence emanates the saddest and warmest voice you can imagine. This instrument of genius, by name Reynaldo Hahn, moves our hearts, moistens our eyes, cures us . . . in a silent and solemn undulation. Never since Schumann has music painted sorrow, tenderness, the calm induced by nature, with such brush strokes of human truth and absolute beauty."

Perhaps not third-rate then—if only one had known him.

Music

Reynaldo Hahn in 1898: Proust's lover and a composer of astonishing precocity