

Romancing the *mélodie* A Hugo Cycle?

Fauré's first song cycle dates from 1878, but our story begins much earlier at the École Niedermeyer. Fauré's student songs, written between 1861 and 1864, already give a taste of the cyclic impulse that would come to dominate his songwriting. This premonition does not appear in musical devices, whether key schemes, thematic recollections, or recurring motives; these features come and go across his seven song cycles. Nor can we locate it in a narrative, for three of those cycles lack any story line. The telltale element in Fauré's adolescent songs is a common poetic vision, a reading that transcends the individual author and poems and engages deeper artistic concerns. As in his later song cycles, Fauré grasped poetry not merely as a source of evocative texts but as a nexus of technical and aesthetic issues bearing on his historical moment. And the issue that unites his earliest songs is genre.

Fauré's student songs demonstrate his lifelong penchant for focusing on a single poet, indeed, a single collection. All six have texts by Victor Hugo and five come from *Les chants du crépuscule* (1835). Fauré mined Hugo's volume for "Le papillon et la fleur," "Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre," "Mai," "L'aube naît," and "S'il est un charmant gazon" (published as "Rêve d'amour"). "Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre" remained unpublished and "L'aube naît" has vanished entirely, although it is mentioned alongside the other songs in a letter from 1864.¹ Fauré set yet another poem from *Les chants du crépuscule*, "L'aurore s'allume," toward the end of the decade.

In studying Fauré's adolescent songs, we immediately face the question of genre. No single category existed for French art song in the 1860s equivalent to the Austro-Germanic *Lied*. Since the late eighteenth century, the native *romance* had dominated song production in France. Elegant and unpretentious, the *romance* featured sentimental or characteristic texts set in strophic form with an unobtrusive piano

accompaniment.² During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a new genre emerged alongside the *romance*, the highbrow *mélodie*. Inspired by Schubert's *Lieder*, composers of *mélodies* gave the piano a more independent role, experimented with nonstrophic forms, and enriched the expressive palette. Guided by Frits Noske's classic study *La mélodie française de Berlioz à Duparc* (1954), histories of French song have tended to trace an evolutionary narrative in which the *mélodie* inevitably usurps the place of the *romance* and reigns supreme after 1870.³

Fauré himself seems to ratify this narrative in a letter from 1870. The composer agrees to send an old schoolmate "the little *mélodie* that you asked for" (most likely "Lydia") as well as "a copy of my *romance* 'S'il est un charmant gazon.'" ⁴ The letter appears to cordon off Fauré's student songs from later and more ambitious compositions like "Lydia" or his three Baudelaire settings. And indeed, his adolescent Hugo songs are lightweight by comparison, with their pastoral texts, simple accompaniments, and strophic form. Fauré's critics have found it easy to follow his lead and retrace the history of French song across his early career. Charles Koechlin brushed past the Hugo settings, dismissing one as "slightly '*romance*,'" and rejoiced at Fauré's emancipation from strophic form.⁵ Jean-Michel Nectoux entitled his fine chapter on the early songs "From the *romance* to the *mélodie*," while Roy Howat and Emily Kilpatrick hailed Fauré's "transition from the *romance* to the *mélodie*" during the 1860s.⁶

Like all evolutionary narratives, however, this account of Fauré's early song-writing downplays the role of the historical agent. It ignores the way in which the composer himself understood and navigated the genres available to him. The evolution of French song into the *mélodie* was by no means preordained in the early 1860s. Composers continued to label songs both *romance* and *mélodie* until the end of the decade, designations that reflected real differences in form and style.⁷ Nor did Fauré lack for Germanic models of song composition during his student years. His tutor Camille Saint-Saëns was a champion of Liszt, Schumann, and Mendelssohn, while his teacher and headmaster Louis Niedermeyer had virtually founded the *mélodie* genre with his 1820 song "Le lac." Niedermeyer cast Alphonse de Lamartine's elegiac poem in the form of an operatic *scène* in which three stanzas of obbligato recitative introduce the lyric set piece, three strophes entitled "Romance." As Saint-Saëns attested, Niedermeyer "broke the mold of the tired old French *romance* and, inspired by the beautiful poems of Lamartine and Victor Hugo, created a new genre, a superior art analogous to the German *Lied*."⁸

Fauré's setting of Hugo's "Tristesse d'Olympio" (*Les rayons et les ombres*), written around 1865, demonstrates how easily he could adopt this elevated style. His song emulates Niedermeyer's "Le lac" just as Hugo's poem emulates Lamartine's elegy. A recitative-like *Grave* built over an operatic *lamento* bass leads into two stormy strophes with a notably free phrase structure. This serious *mélodie*, written just a year or two after "S'il est un charmant gazon," muddies the image of a linear evolution from *romance* to *mélodie*. Indeed, Fauré circled back to his lighter man-

ner in his next Hugo settings, “Dans les ruines d’une abbaye” and “L’aurore”—as one would expect from their lighter pastoral texts.

Yet Fauré perhaps learned a deeper lesson about genre from “Le lac.” In Niedermeyer’s song the young composer found a strophic *romance*, labeled as such, embedded within a *mélodie* of Teutonic scope and gravitas. Niedermeyer’s song does not renounce the *romance* but deploys it artfully within the larger form of the operatic *scène*. Dramaturgically, the *romance* becomes a site of memory, the timeless lyric moment in which the bereaved poet finds consolation. Fauré’s “Tristesse d’Olympio” frames the *romance* even more clearly as a retrospective utterance. The introductory *Grave* recounts the poet’s return to the site of his lost love, ending as the poet begins his lament:

Il se sentit le cœur triste comme une tombe,
Alor il s’écria:

His heart felt as sad as a tomb,
So he cried out:

The following strophes render the poet’s elegy, enclosed within quotation marks. The strophic *romance* again provides a locus of memory and nostalgia, a role that reflects its historical position as a conservative, backward-looking genre.

The evolutionary view of Fauré’s early songwriting, then, is not merely dubious history. It also leads to an impoverished reading of his early songs. As “Tristesse d’Olympio” demonstrates, Fauré did not abandon the *romance* in favor of the *mélodie* but combined both in a sophisticated dialogue. And it was Hugo’s poetry that inspired this play between genres. To read Fauré’s songs in this manner requires that we view genres as more than taxonomic categories. Musical genres function instead as codes shared by composers, performers, and listeners, which activate expectations and shape the reception of individual works. Indeed, a composer can evoke multiple genres within the same work to produce a complex, resonant utterance.⁹ This chapter explores the dialogue of genres within Fauré’s surviving songs from *Les chants du crépuscule*, showing how he manipulated the generic codes of the *romance* and *mélodie* in response to Hugo’s poetry. Our study of the student songs will in turn prepare for the following chapters by demonstrating the sophisticated grasp of poetic art that guided Fauré from his earliest efforts as a songwriter.

AN ANACREONTIC CYCLE

In *Les chants du crépuscule*, as in the preceding *Feuilles d’automne*, Hugo grappled with the new energies unleashed by the July Revolution of 1830. His title plays on the twin meanings of *crépuscule*, both dawn and dusk, to express the uncertainty of the times. As he mused in the preface, “Society waits to see if what lies on the

horizon will be fully illuminated or whether it will be absolutely extinguished.”¹⁰ The cluster of texts set by Fauré begins midway through the thirty-nine poems of Hugo’s collection (see the list of poems). An envoi to the *Feuilles d’automne* (no. 18) closes the first half, which consists of political odes and meditations. “L’aurore s’allume” (no. 20) heralds a new dawn, lit not by human events but by the eternal truths of nature:

Livre salutaire	Salutary book
Où le cœur s’emplit!	Where the heart is replenished!
Où tout sage austère	Where every austere sage
Travaille et pâlit!	Labors and grows pale!
Dont le sens rebelle	Whose recalcitrant meaning
Parfois se révèle!	Sometimes reveals itself!
Pythagore épèle	Pythagoras deciphers
Et Moïse lit!	And Moses reads!

The short five-syllable lines signal a shift to the lighter *chanson* genre. Indeed, the succeeding poems, from which Fauré drew his song texts, abandon politics for pastoral verse and meditations inspired by nature. Fauré set nos. 22, 23, 25, 27, and 31, and later “L’aurore s’allume” itself.

Between the two halves of the volume, preceding “L’aurore s’allume,” comes a short ode to Anacreon (no. 19), the ancient Ionian poet of wine, love, and song:

Anacréon, poète aux ondes érotiques	
Qui filtre du sommet des sagesse antiques,	
Et qu’on trouve à mi-côte alors qu’on y gravit,	
Clair, à l’ombre, épandu sur l’herbe qui revit,	
Tu me plais, doux poète au flot calme et limpide!	
Quand le sentier qui monte aux cimes est rapide,	
Bien souvent, fatigués du soleil, nous aimons	
Boire au petit ruisseau tamisé par les monts!	
Anacreon, poet of the erotic waters,	
You who filter ancient wisdom from the summit,	
Which we find midway up the mountain as we climb,	
Bright in the shade, diffused over the reviving grass,	
You please me, sweet poet of the calm and limpid stream!	
When the path that ascends to the heights is steep,	
How often, weary from the sun, we love	
To drink from the little brook filtered by the mountains!	

Anacreon’s modern reception had peaked during the eighteenth century. A handful of surviving odes (now known to be wrongly attributed) were translated and imitated and gained currency in France through Pierre de Ronsard’s sixteenth-

Contents of Victor Hugo, *Les chants du crépuscule* (1835),
with dates of Fauré's settings

Préface

Prélude

1. Dicté après juillet 1830
 2. À la colonne
 3. Hymne
 4. Noces et festins
 5. Napoléon II
 6. Sur le bal de l'Hotel-de-Ville
 7. O Dieu! Si vous avez la France sous vos ailes
 8. À Canaris
 9. Seule au pied de la tour d'où sort la voix du maître
 10. À l'homme qui a livré une femme
 11. A M. le D. d'O.
 12. À Canaris
 13. Il n'avait pas vingt ans. Il avait abusé
 14. Oh! N'insultez jamais une femme qui tombe!
 15. Conseil
 16. Le grand homme vaincu peut perdre en un instant
 17. À Alphonse Rabbe
 18. Envoi des *Feuilles d'automne* à Madame ***
 19. Anacréon, poète aux ondes érotiques
 20. **L'aurore s'allume (c. 1868–70)**
 21. Hier, la nuit d'été, qui nous prêtait ses voiles
 22. **Nouvelle chanson sur un vieil air (1864)**
 23. **Autre chanson (c. 1862–64)**
 24. Oh! pour remplir de moi ta rêveuse pensée
 25. **Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre à ta coupe encore pleine (1862)**
 26. À mademoiselle J.
 27. **La pauvre fleur disait au papillon céleste (c. 1861–62)**
 28. Au bord de la mer
 29. Puisque nos heures sont remplies
 30. Espoir en Dieu
 31. **Puisque mai tout en fleurs dans les prés nous réclame (c. 1862–64)**
 32. À Louis B.
 33. Dans l'église de ***
 34. Écrit sur la première page d'un Pétrarque
 35. Les autres en tous sens laissent aller leur vie
 36. Toi! sois bénie à jamais!
 37. À mademoiselle Louise B.
 38. Que nous avons le doute en nous
 39. Date lilia
-

century versions. Most recently, Charles-Marie René Leconte de Lisle had translated nine Anacreontic odes in his *Poèmes antiques* (1852), the last of which Fauré would set in 1890 (“La rose”). The author and critic Léo Joubert reviewed Leconte de Lisle’s translations in 1863, giving an intriguing description of the Anacreontic genre:

The gaze effortlessly embraces a bounded field that displays familiar and alluring objects; the hyacinth blooms there; the rose spreads its purple robe beside the green ivy; the swallow babbles from break of dawn; the dew-drunk cicada sings on the high branches; reclining on the fresh myrtle and green lotus, an old man with white temples but a youthful heart drains his cup and watches the young girls dance to the sound of the zither. This little landscape, invented for the express pleasure of the eyes, is so lively, so brilliant, that we never think to count the artificial flowers in the decorative garlands; the little scenes of this *mascarade galante* succeed one another too quickly to weary us.¹¹

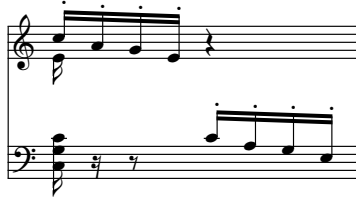
Joubert’s vignette summons all the Anacreontic commonplaces—idyllic nature, wine, revelry, erotic desire, old age. Yet it also evokes the pleasure parks of the *fêtes galantes*, the fantastic eighteenth-century landscapes of Antoine Watteau that were enjoying a vogue in French poetry.¹² Joubert fashioned his Arcadia as a theater, adorned with silk roses, where maskers play their stock roles. His essay celebrates the deliberate artifice of the Anacreontic genre, its play between surface convention and lyric depth.¹³

No poem in *Les chants du crépuscule* better demonstrates this equivocation than the lyric subtitled “S’il est un charmant gazon.” The poem bears the title “Nouvelle chanson sur un vieil air”—roughly, new words to an old tune. Hugo wove pastoral imagery into an intimate romantic confession, using a complex rhyme scheme and tortuous syntax. Yet his artful poem is haunted by the specter of the lost air. The anonymous folk relic hides beneath the modern poet’s verses, mutely reminding us that Hugo’s jasmine, lily, and honeysuckle are but painted copies of nature. Liszt, Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Franck, and many other composers set “S’il est un charmant gazon,” but as we shall see, only Fauré found the irony in Hugo’s title.

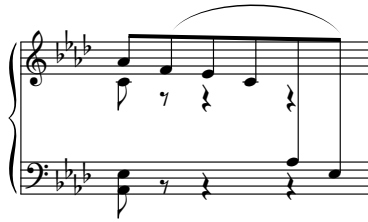
The poems that Fauré chose from *Les chants du crépuscule* exemplify both the erotic tone of the Anacreontic genre and its delicate artifice. “La pauvre fleur disait au papillon céleste,” in which a flower chides her unfaithful butterfly, is a sly allegory by the priapic Hugo with an envoi dedicated to his mistress Juliette Drouet. Notably, Fauré chose the only two *chansons* in Hugo’s collection, songs in which lyric expression is distanced as performance. “Autre chanson” (subtitled “L’aube naît”) even originated as a stage song in Hugo’s play *Angelo, tyran de Padoue*. While we can only guess at Fauré’s treatment of “L’aube naît,” the autograph score of “S’il est un charmant gazon” imitates a serenader’s mandolin with an accompaniment in broken *staccato* chords. Fauré used a similar piano figuration in “Puisque j’ai mis ma lèvre,” despite the poem’s more elevated register (he was perhaps tempted by Hugo’s racy opening line, “Since I placed my lips to your still brimming cup”). Fauré

EXAMPLE 1.1. Common pentatonic motive in Fauré's settings from Hugo, *Les chants du crépuscule*. Based on Fauré, *Complete Songs*, vol. 1: 1861-1882, ed. Roy Howat and Emily Kilpatrick (London: Peters Edition, 2015).

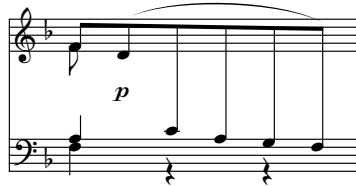
a. "Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre," m. 8.



b. "Mai," m. 34.



c. "S'il est un charmant gazon," m. 8.



left a motivic signature on these *chanson* accompaniments: the piano ritornellos of "Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre" and "S'il est un charmant gazon" trail off with the same descending pentatonic figure, as does the ritornello in the autograph of "Mai" (see example 1.1). This naïve coda, which follows passages of real harmonic complexity, sets an appropriately arch tone for poems presided over by the spirit of Anacreon.

“Anacréon aux ondes érotiques” advertises the titillating nature of the genre, but it offered Fauré another clue as well. The protagonist finds the refreshing waters “mi-côte,” midway up the mountain. Similarly, Hugo’s ode arrives midway through *Les chants du crépuscule* as a respite from his odes to the Greek patriot Canaris or his diatribe against the Chambre des députés. The Anacreontic ode, or *odelette* as poets from Ronsard to Gautier called it, occupies a middle register between the sublime ode and the lower forms of satire and comedy. In short, an educated reader would not have mistaken the turn to pastoral love poetry in the second half of *Les chants du crépuscule* as a stylistic regression but would have understood it as a self-conscious modulation between genres.

Neither should the simplicity of Fauré’s adolescent songs imply a lack of maturity, technique, or ambition. Read within the context of Hugo’s collection, their unpretentious charm suggests a deliberate artistic choice. Fauré’s student songs do not lack in sophistication, but they mask it behind a faux-naïf manner that matches Hugo’s artful simplicity. What distinguishes these songs from truly naïve *romances* is the keen awareness of Hugo’s poetic craft: in apparently systematic fashion, Fauré concentrated on a different aspect of the poet’s art in each song, whether prosody, syntax, rhetoric, or genre. This astute reading should come as no surprise in a pupil of Niedermeyer’s school who studied literature as part of the curriculum and won prizes in 1858 and 1862.¹⁴ The following discussion, based on the autograph scores, looks closely at Fauré’s craftsmanship in his student songs, and readers should prepare for some detailed technical analysis. It will be time and effort well spent. The analyses of the Hugo settings lay the foundations for the rest of the book in two ways. First, they establish Fauré’s bona fides as a reader, showing the urbane grasp of poetic art in his earliest settings. Second, they show how instead of merely tossing off individual songs, the young composer was already exploring a single idea from different angles, generating a set of songs unified neither by musical features nor by a story line, but by a common poetic ideal.

But do Fauré’s settings from *Les chants du crépuscule* in fact constitute a hidden cycle? To answer this question, we must recapture the horizon against which he was writing in the early 1860s. French composers had as yet no native models equivalent to Beethoven’s *An die ferne Geliebte*, Schubert’s *Die schöne Müllerin*, or Schumann’s *Frauenliebe und -leben*. Not until 1866 did Jules Massenet compose *Poème d’avril*, the first French song cycle with a unified narrative and thematic recollections. Fauré could only look back to Hector Berlioz’s *Les nuits d’été* (1841) and Félicien David’s *Les perles d’Orient* (1846).¹⁵ Apart from its evocative title, Berlioz’s work coheres solely through its poetic source, Gautier’s *La Comédie de la mort*, while David’s songs have four different poets and share only an exotic theme. By these standards, Fauré’s five songs would indeed qualify as a cycle had he published them together. The common piano motive certainly argues for a unified conception. The autograph of “Mai” provides another possible clue: Fauré entitled