

The Swiss conductor, Ernest Ansermet, came from a musical family; he successively studied the clarinet, violin and brass instruments, which he used in fanfares; later he wrote military marches for the Swiss army which he did not consider important. Besides Music, he studied Mathematics in Lausanne and graduated with a Diploma in 1903; until 1906 he taught at the Lausanne Grammar School, then he decided to continue his studies at the Sorbonne and, at the same time, to attend courses at the Paris Conservatory. After his return to Lausanne, he taught Mathematics for one more year before devoting himself entirely to music.



Ansermet was a particular advocate of the Swiss composers Arthur Honegger and Frank Martin. He conducted the first performances of the following works of A. Honegger: *Horace victorieux* (1921), *Chant de joie* (1923), *Rugby* (1928) and *Pacific 231* (1923), which was dedicated to him, and of the following works of Frank Martin: *Symphonie* (1938), *In terra pax* (1945), *Der Sturm* (1956), *Le mystère de la Nativité* (1959), *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac* (1963) and *Les Quatre Éléments*, which were dedicated to him. Also important were the first performances of Benjamin Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and *Cantata misericordium* (1963).

# Ravel *Shéhérazade* Berlioz *Nuits D'été*



L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande  
Ernest Ansermet  
Soprano Vocals – Régine Crespin

Ravel was drawn to the sensual allure of the Orient as early as 1898, when he composed the "Overture de Shéhérazade," a work which quotes a Persian melody while drawing on the spiritual ancestry of Rimsky-Korsakov's "Sheherazade" of 1888. He returned to its title in 1903 for this cycle of three songs for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, based on the exotic texts of the French poet Tristan Klingsor. With "Shéhérazade," his first major statement for orchestra, Ravel demonstrates his mastery of muted and climactic orchestral details, while eliciting equal measures of ecstasy and restraint for the human voice.

Like the story in Rimsky-Korsakov's famous suite, "Shéhérazade" conjures up Eastern tales of indulgence, perversity, death and danger. The first poem, "Asie" opens with a hushed string tremolo, followed by a meandering oboe melody, establishing a seductive atmosphere of Oriental fantasy. The opening four lines are declaimed syllabically and recitative-like ("Asia, Asia, Asia/marvelous old land of nursery tales/where fantasy sleeps like an empress/in her forest filled with mystery"). Pentatonic scale figures, grace notes and fluttering strings further impart the poem's chilling decadence, leading to an accelerating climax on the words "I would like to see those who die for love as well as those who die for hatred." The piece falls silent and shimmers to a close, as the recitative of the opening concludes the tale over a faintly rolling timpani.

"La Flute enchantée" and "L'indifferent," are considerably shorter than "Asie," and each song concludes with a brief yet subtly modified reference to the opening theme. "La Flute enchantée" is a timeless portrait of a girl listening to the sounds of a flute, while "L'indifferent" -- sometimes regarded as the most beautiful of all of Ravel's songs -- concerns the attraction of the unattainable. If all three of the Tristan Klingsor settings in the cycle are expressions of longing, this final one finds a particularly personal tone, through false modality, and a final pandiatonically extended triad with a major ninth. After "Shéhérazade," Ravel wrote no song with an erotic theme until he completed "Chansons madécasses" in 1926.

Hector Berlioz *Les Nuits d'été* is a cycle of six settings of poems written by Théophile Gautier. Though their subjects have little direct connection, each

possesses the sultry, scented charm implied by Berlioz's title. The songs were composed in 1832 and published in 1841. Except for "Absence," which was orchestrated in 1843, the orchestral versions of the remaining songs were completed in 1856.

Aside from their immediate appeal, they suggest that, before the rise of a new school of composers such as Fauré, Duparc, Debussy, and Ravel, Berlioz was reacting to a demand for songs of a distinctively French character, compared with the then-widely popular German lied. However, the American musicologist Alfred Einstein's assertion that Berlioz "sowed the seeds for the entire musical lyricism of the nineteenth century in the French language" is surely an exaggeration: he was too much an admirer of German music to do such a thing. Indeed, the first song "Villanelle" is almost strophic, only the third stanza showing any real harmonic or melodic changes in the vocal line, a device which makes it reminiscent of Schubert.

Singers tend to pick and choose among the songs performed but, since all easily stand on their own merits, this does not matter a great deal. "Absence," a call for the return of the beloved, would, for example, make an impressive opening to the cycle. "Le spectre de la rose" (I am the ghost of the rose you wore at the ball) is operatic in character and avoids the obvious waltz rhythms used in the ballet music that was also inspired by this poem. "Sur la lagunes," a lament for a dead lover, was also set by Fauré under the title *Chanson de pêcheur*. Berlioz makes it into a barcarolle, with a flowing accompaniment and echoes of Spain and Italy. "Au cimetière" (the churchyard where the beloved lies) is a lament, with the added dimension of modern-sounding semitone changes and enharmonic modulations -- evidence of Berlioz's constant search for ways to distance himself from conventional tonality. The final song, "L'île inconnue," a light serenade, (where will you go, fair one in my magic boat) is -- apart from one rather awkward cadence just before the lady replies -- similarly progressive in its tonality. The tenderly expressive qualities of these settings makes one wish that Berlioz had continued his dedication to French poetry.

# Ravel Shéhérazade Berlioz Nuits D'Été

Régine Crespin, vocals  
L'Orchestre De La Suisse Romande  
conducted by Ernest Ansermet

## Ravel Shéhérazade

1 Asie 9:10

2 La Flûte Enchantée 2:35

3 L'indifférent 3:40

## Berlioz Nuits D'été

4 Villanelle 2:15

5 Le Spectre De La Rose 7:05

6 Absence 5:25

7 Sur Les Lagune 6:06

8 Au Cimetière 5:40

9 L'île Inconnue 3:40

Recorded by Decca 1963  
Engineer: James Lock Producer: Michael Bremner



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