

Ravel chose three of Bertrand/Gaspard's poems: *Ondine*, *Le Gibet*, and *Scarbo*, the full English translations of which can be found below. The programmatic nature of the suite and the musical representations of specific lines of the poems make this piece a particularly interesting listening experience.

Ondine is about a siren who unsuccessfully attempts to lure a man underwater to join her, "to be the spouse of an Ondine and escort her to her palace, to become the lord of the lakes." The man, however, is in love with someone else and tells her so, and she "shed some tears, gave a burst of laughter and vanished in a showery gush." The siren's song, introduced in the third measure, can be heard clearly throughout the piece as a simple, continuous melody. Accompanying the simplicity of the song are surging figurations that invoke sounds of water and waves. The piece ends abruptly, dissolving into nothingness, just as Bertrand's poem describes.

Le Gibet ("The Gallows") is a slow, meditative movement reflecting the image of a hanged corpse in the desert as bells toll in the distance. The repeated ostinato b-flat represents the bells, constant and unaffected by the ongoings around it. The stillness and remoteness of the scene is further supplemented by Ravel's instructions: "*Sans presser ni ralentir jusqu'à la fin*" ("Without pressing forward or slowing down until the end"). Despite the moments of lyricism in the piece, it remains almost shockingly cold and distant; sentimentality is reserved for the living, of which there are none in this desolate landscape.

The final movement, *Scarbo*, is infamously technically difficult. Ravel intended to write a piece more challenging than Balíkirev's *Islamey*, at the time considered the most difficult piece in the piano repertoire, following also in the footsteps of virtuoso Romantic composers such as Paganini and Liszt. Ravel himself remarked, "I wanted to make a caricature of romanticism. Perhaps it got the better of me." The poem describes a mischievous goblin who sneaks around at night, disappearing and reappearing abruptly and terrifying the narrator in his bed. Ravel creates this terrifying quality in the piece by keeping much of it under-the-surface, abruptly cutting off phrases, and incorporating various elements of mania and instability intended to surprise, scare, and unsettle the audience. At the end of Bertrand's poem, the narrator describes, "... his face blanched like melting wax – and suddenly his light went out." The music ends similarly, with a quick arpeggiated figure that disappears abruptly into silence.

On the following page are Bertrand's poems, translated from French by Matthias Müller.

Ondine

- "Hark! – Hark! – It is I,
Ondine brushing with watery
pearls across the quivering
diamonds of your window
beshone by the moon's
mournful rays: and here, the
châteleine, in her shimmering
gown gazing from her
balcony at the balmy starlit
night and the lovely
slumbering lake.

Every wave is a sprite
swimming in the current,
every current is a path
winding toward my palace,
and my palace stands, fluidly
built, in the depths of the lake
in the triangle of air, earth
and fire.

Hark! – Hark! – My father is
thrashing the croaking water
with a green branch of alder
and my sisters caress with
their frothy arms the dewy
islands of grasses, waterlilies,
and gladioli, or mock the frail
and bearded willow angling
in the water."

Having murmured her song,
she implored me to receive
her ring on my finger, to be
the spouse of an Ondine and
escort her to her palace, to
become the lord of the lakes.

And when I replied that I
loved a mortal, sulky and
vexed, she shed some tears,
gave a burst of laughter and
vanished in a showery gush
that rippled white across my
blue window panes.

Le Gibet

Ah! Could it be the night's
wind's chilly scream I hear,
or the hanged man heaving a
sigh on the gallows' forks?

Could it be the call of some
cricket hidden in the moss
and the barren ivy with which
the forest out of pity cloaks
its feet?

Could it be some fly on the
hunt sounding its horn around
these ears now deaf to the
blowing of the mort?

Could it be some scarab
plucking on its fitful flight a
bloodied hair from his bald
skull?

Or could it be some spider
weaving half a length of
muslin as a cravat for this
strangled neck?

It is the bell knelling on a
town's walls below the
horizon, and the carcass of a
hanged man reddened by the
sinking sun.

Scarbo

Oh, how often have I heard
and seen him, Scarbo, when
at midnight the moon shines
in the sky like a silver coin
on an azure banner
besprinkled with golden
bees!

How often have I heard his
laughter droning in the
shadows of my alcove, and
his claw scraping on the
silken curtains of my bed!

How often have I seen him
descend from the ceiling,
twirl on one foot and tumble
across the room like a spindle
fallen off a witch's distaff!

Did I then believe he'd
vanished? The gnome would
swell between the moon and
me like the spire of a Gothic
cathedral, a gilded bell
tinkling on his pointed hat!

But soon his body would turn
blue, translucent like a
candle's wax, his face paled
like a fading stump – and
suddenly he melted away.