

Tendresse! – notes

Tendresse! is a lyrical poem by the French poet Léon Darsonval, who, in addition to being an early and distinguished aviator (in balloons), was also a poet with a great love of the area of his birth in the department of l'Aube, in which the stream named l'Arlette runs.

His son writes:

“... , en 1946, heureux d'être grand-père d'une petite fille prénommée Arlette, il écrivit une charmante plaquette ornée de bois originaux de Charles FAVET, " La bonne Fée Arlette ". Malheureusement, en cette même année, Arlette vint à mourir et le grand-père désespéré compléta son livret par " L'Etoile Arlette ". Ce qui fit dire à un écrivain de talent que son auteur Léon DARSONVAL avait ajouté un chapitre émouvant à " L'art d'être grand-père " . Aujourd'hui, la petite Arlette repose au fond du vallon, pas très loin de la source dont elle porte le nom.”

“... Today little Arlette [Léon's granddaughter, who died before her first birthday] lies at rest at the end of the valley, not very far from the spring whose name she bears”

This sad comment probably explains both the name and the word-world of the poem 'Tendresse'.



'Tendresse' is the latest of four songs that Anthony Hodson has composed for, and that have been sung by John Kimbell, baritone, at the Woodley Festival (others being 'Spring', 'Fall' (Gerard Manley Hopkins) and 'Little Gidding' (TS Eliot).

All these songs (with others) can be found on Anthony's song web-page:

www.xdoto.com/music/songs

John is half-French, and after 'Little Gidding' was written at his suggestion for 2016, he threw down the challenge of a poem in French – 'Tendresse'. Anthony's earlier settings of English verse have faced rhythmic word-setting challenges, but 'Tendresse' required particularly careful collaboration between John and Anthony to establish a viable relationship between the lyrical line of the music and the flow, rhythm and stress of the French text.

Given the vocal line, the accompaniment attempts to convey the brook, the rustic valley, and the intertwining lines of Arlette and the water-nymph Ondine. In the introduction and first verse, the brook runs in quiet moto perpetuo, its triplets burbling away in the lower bass clef, while the right-hand plays a lyrical counter-melody (the water-nymph?) , against the voice over gentle, though mostly dissonant, chords that representing the wooded valley. The mood changes quickly for the second verse .The emotional instability of the last part of the poem is reflected in the changing tonality and pace as Ondine reminds Arlette that leaving the woods and the reedbeds for open country is not grim death, but an entering into a place of light.

The uncertain ending reflects the paradox of death, and the thoughts of the poet about his little granddaughter Arlette, and her tragically early death, and his way of self-consolation.

Anthony Hodson

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