A Rosary Among the Roses: Tracing Pastoral Allusions and Spiritual Resonances in Chamber Music by Mel Bonis

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Abstract
The French woman composer Mel Bonis (1858-1937) remains little known, despite a considerable oeuvre comprising over three hundred works in a variety of instrumental and vocal genres. Recent efforts to rediscover her life and work have resulted in new editions of scores, performances, and recordings of her work, as well as a biography, but few have even heard her name outside of her native France. Although she lived through almost four decades of the twentieth century, Bonis' works invite analysis within the historical contexts of late nineteenth-century French nationalism and Romantic nostalgia. In addition to her cultural milieu, her own personal circumstances also left their traces. Bonis' strict Catholic upbringing led to internal conflicts with her religious identity throughout her adult life. This thesis shows some of the ways in which Bonis responded to these national and individual circumstances. In particular, I analyze two of her mélodies for voice with piano – Élégie sur le mode antique (Op. 110, 1918) and Pourriez-vous pas me dire (Op. 55, 1901) – as well as her instrumental Scènes de la forêt (Op. 123, 1928) as case studies from Bonis' vast chamber music repertoire. I argue that Bonis' works are better understood when considered in relation to her life events, including her fraught relationship with her Catholic faith. I speculate that the influence of Bonis' Catholicism can be felt in her secular as well as sacred works. To this end, I propose new extensions of music analysis techniques that build on theories of harmony and of musical meaning. I situate my analytical approaches by drawing on literary ideas of the pastoral and on the fin-de-siècle French historical context for the kind of nostalgia that is inherent in the pastoral sensibility. I hope that my work will provide a new way of understanding the complex relationships between music and religious identity in late nineteenth-century France, and that this work will help to make Mel Bonis and her music more accessible to Anglophone readers and listeners.

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