

Donald Crockett: *'Carving an Alphabet' A Book of Madrigals for Five Cellos* (2019)

SAKURA cello quintet's core repertoire has included direct transcriptions of Renaissance madrigals in four and five voices ever since they created the ensemble several years ago. My response to these cello-playing madrigalists is a new book of madrigals, *Carving an Alphabet*, composed with the expressivity, virtuosity and hyper-extended range of SAKURA always in mind. The emotional landscape (lovelorn, passionate, miserable, nature-loving, awestruck, etc.) of the late-16th /early-17th century madrigal composers and their favorite poets is also reflected here. To help me inhabit the appropriate creative space I adapted fragments of poetry from two of my own favorite poets, Michael Ondaatje and Czeslaw Milosz, which I use as titles and scenarios for this collection of madrigals-without-voices. The 'title song,' for example, comes from Michael Ondaatje's book of poems, *Secular Love*:

and with the solitude of the air

behind them

carved an alphabet

whose motive was perfect desire

Carving an Alphabet was commissioned for SAKURA by New Music USA for premiere at the 2020 Piatigorsky International Cello Festival and was completed in summer 2019.

-Donald Crockett, composer

Composer Donald Crockett
(third from left) with members
of SAKURA



Gabriel Fauré: *Cinq mélodies de Venise* (1891)

*Et quand, solennel, le soir
Des chênes noirs tombera,
Voix de notre désespoir,
Le rossignol chantera.*

*And when, solemnly in the evening,
Will fall from black oak trees
The voice of our hopelessness,
The nightingale will sing*

-Excerpt from Verlaine, *En sourdine* (1869)

Continuing on a poetic thread, the next piece is a transcription of a song cycle by Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), set to the poetry of the great Symbolist writer, Paul Verlaine (1844-1896). Composed in the summer of 1891, *Cinq mélodies de Venise* was inspired by Fauré's trip to *la Serenissima* as a guest of the soon-to-be Princesse de Polignac, Winnaretta Singer. An avid fan of café culture and people watching, Fauré spent most of his time composing this song cycle while sitting with pen in hand on a Venetian or Parisian *terrasse*, so much so that Singer pointed out in a letter that he barely used the "peaceful room" at the Palazzo Volkoff that she had rented for him.

Taking the texts of five of Verlaine's poems, Fauré adds a musical setting to each, beginning with *Mandoline* from the 1869 *Fêtes galantes* collection. The *Fêtes galantes* are a series of twenty-two short poems, featuring scenes of seduction and amorous intrigues between idealized characters from the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* tradition. Imagine a stage full of actors in brightly colored costumes, enacting mythical stories not so much through their speech but through their dramatic gestures and studied facial expressions. This was the world Verlaine was inhabiting in the *Fêtes galantes*, and the first poem-turned-song of the cycle, *Mandoline*, lays out setting perfectly:

The text of *Mandoline*, all translations by Saagar Asnani

Les donneurs de sérénades Et les belles écouteuses Echangent des propos fades Sous les ramures chanteuses.	All these serenaders And their beautiful listeners Exchange sweet nothings Beneath the singing treetops.
C'est Tircis et c'est Aminte, Et c'est l'éternel Clitandre, Et c'est Damis qui pour mainte Cruelle fait maint vers tendre.	There's Tircis, and there's Aminta, And there's the eternal Clitandre, And then there's Damis, who for such Cruel women, wrote such tender verse.
Leurs courtes vestes de soie, Leurs longues robes à queues,	Their short silken jackets, Their long dresses with trains,

Leur élégance, leur joie Et leurs molles ombres bleues	Their elegance, their joy And their soft blue shadows
Tourbillonnent dans l'extase D'une lune rose et grise, Et la mandoline jase Parmi les frissons de brise.	Twirl about in their ecstasy From one moon, pink and gray And the mandolin titillates Upon gusts of breeze.

Mandoline, alongside *En sourdine*, were the only songs of the cycle to actually be composed in Venice during Fauré's trip *chez Madame Singer*. The final three, *Green*, *A Clymène*, and *C'est l'extase*, were finished upon his return to Paris (but likely also from the comfort of a busy *terrasse* rather than of his own home).

With great attention paid to the ups and downs of the poetic plotline across the five songs, Fauré claimed to have invented a new musical form with this composition: one in which the poetry mirrored the formal elements of the song, with the final song (*C'est l'extase*) recapitulating both musical themes from all four preceding songs and poetic ideas from their lyrics. Across all five songs we find strong themes of pastoral love alongside musings on the sounds and music of the world around us. Just as the treetops in *Mandoline* sing and the narrator's head is "*tout sonore encor de vos derniers baisers*" ('still resounding with your last kisses') in *Green*, we see Verlaine using words as a medium for breathing sonic life into otherwise silent and inanimate objects around him. Fauré saw these verses as an invitation to incorporate melody into the already musical world of Verlaine's lyrics.

The fourth song of the cycle, *A Clymène* ('*To Clymene*') most clearly embodies this play between song and word.

Mystiques barcarolles, Romances sans paroles, Chère, puisque tes yeux, Couleur des cieux, Puisque ta voix, étrange Vision qui dérange Et trouble l'horizon De ma raison, Puisque l'arôme insigne De la pâleur de cygne, Et puisque la candeur De ton odeur, Ah ! puisque tout ton être, Musique qui pénètre, Nimbés d'anges défunts, Tons et parfums, A, sur d'âmes cadences,	Mystic <i>barcarolles</i> , Romances without words, Dear, for your eyes, The color of the sky, For your voice, so strange A vision which disturbs And troubles the horizon Of my reason, For the extraordinary aroma Of the swan's paleness, For the candor Of your odor, Ah! For your entire being, Music which penetrates, Halos of long dead angels, Notes and scents, Has, on nourishing cadences,
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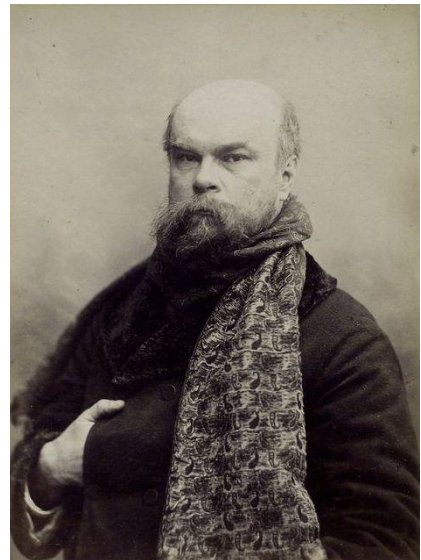
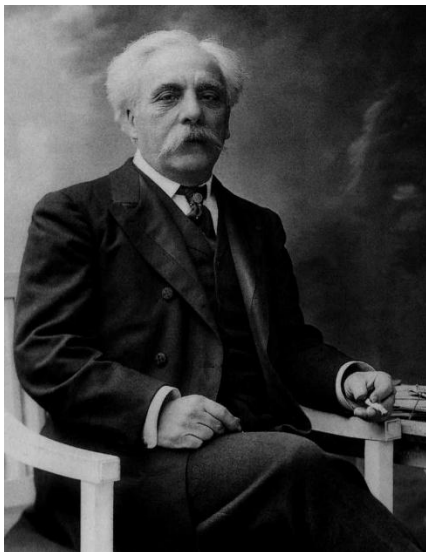
En ces correspondances Induit mon cœur subtil, Ainsi soit-il !	Within these letters, Incited my subtle heart, So may it be!
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The text draws attention to its form as a *barcarolle*, an improvised tune traditionally sung by the gondoliers of Venice in its very text, but the rhyme, syllabic structure, and even sonic declamation of the words takes us on an aquatic journey, with the very cadence of the phrases bobbing up and down just like the movement of the *gondola* through the city's canals. To communicate Verlaine's poetry musically, Fauré adopts a 9/8 triple meter with an ostinato triplet rhythm carrying through the entire song, putting us on a melodic boat through dusky canals in the heart of Venice.

C'est l'extase langoureuse, C'est la fatigue amoureuse, C'est tous les frissons des bois Parmi l'étreinte des brises, C'est, vers les ramures grises, Le chœur des petites voix.	It is languorous ecstasy, It is amorous fatigue, It is all the trees' shudders As they are pushed by breeze, It is, from the gray treetops, The chorus of little voices.
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Coming full circle, the final song, *C'est l'extase*, hearkens back to the "singing treetops" of *Mandoline*, where the lovers' ecstasy transforms from an energetic dance into a sluggish melancholy. The joys of love have turned into nostalgia, metamorphosing Fauré's hands into a sweet dream, the realities of love melting away into our reveries.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



From left to right, Gabriel Fauré, Winnaretta Singer, Paul Verlaine

Claude Debussy: *Préludes* (1909-1912) and *Clair de Lune* (1882)

Votre âme est un paysage choisi.

'Your soul is a chosen landscape.'

Claude Debussy's (1862-1918) experiments with Verlaine's lyrics preceded Fauré's by a few years. In 1882, he published a collection of five songs taken from Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*, with which the songs collection shares its title. Just like in Fauré's cycle, the poems *En sourdine* and *Mandoline* are explored in the guise of a duet for piano and singer (and now for five celli). *Clair de Lune*, (Moonlight') is a special poem in Verlaine's repertoire, for it breathes life into the very moonlight, giving it the power to incite song and emotions within everything it touches.

Text of *Clair de Lune*, translated by Saagar Asnani

<p>Votre âme est un paysage choisi Que vont charmants masques et bergamasques Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.</p> <p>Tout en chantant sur le mode mineur L'amour vainqueur et la vie opportune Ils n'ont pas l'air de croire à leur bonheur Et leur chanson se mêle au clair de lune,</p> <p>Au calme clair de lune triste et beau, Qui fait rêver les oiseaux dans les arbres Et sangloter d'extase les jets d'eau, Les grands jets d'eau sveltes parmi les marbres.</p>	<p>Your soul is a chosen landscape Where go charming masks and dancers Playing the lute and dancing and almost Sad beneath their fantastic costumes.</p> <p>All while singing in the minor mode Love the conqueror and opportunistic life They don't seem to believe in their joy And their song mixes with the moonlight,</p> <p>In the calm moonlight, sad and beautiful, Which makes birds dream in their trees And fountains sigh from ecstasy, Tall and delicate fountains among marbles.</p>
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Debussy imparts to this music the ability to breathe alongside the musicians. With a steady harmonic rhythm that carries through from the opening to the final line, we feel our own breath steady as we gaze at the silver rays of the full moon spilling across the landscape of our soul.

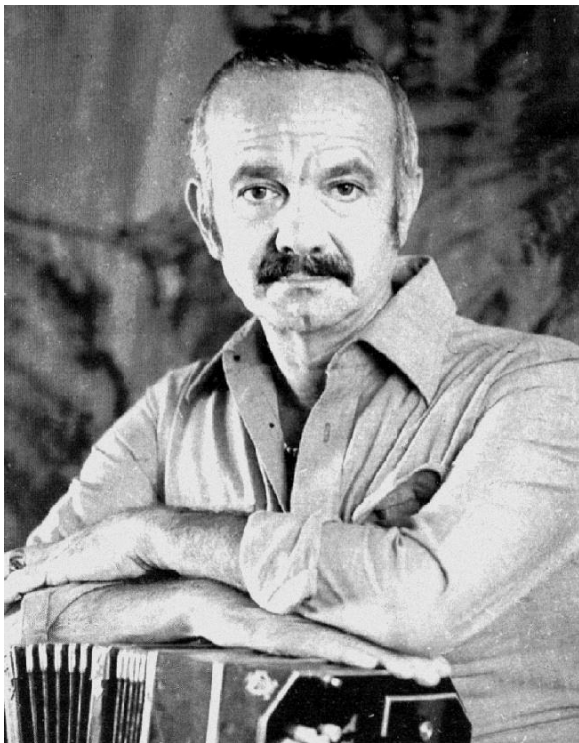
Debussy's *Préludes* are a response to Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, in which the French composer explores the timbral and technical ranges of the instrument, cementing the techniques which he himself used to great avail in his own piano works like the evergreen third movement from the *Suite Bergamesque* (the same *Clair de Lune* piano solo which is so widely popular today).
-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Astor Piazzolla: *Adiós Nonino* (1959)

The Argentina-born American composer, Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) was known the world over for his love of the tango dance. Growing up in New York City, he learned how to play the bandoneón (button accordion) from Italian teachers, and when he returned to Buenos Aires at age 16, he pursued the instrument as his main field of study, taking up bandoneónista gigs at night. He even traveled to Paris to study with Nadia Boulanger. But rather than becoming another Ravel or Copland, Piazzolla was baptized the father of Nuevo Tango, bringing the music of the tango to renowned concert halls across the world and attracting world class soloists like Yo-Yo Ma and Gidon Kremer to his works.

Adiós Nonino is a heartfelt tribute to Piazzolla's dear father, Vicente "Nonino" Piazzolla, who passed away in 1959 after a bicycle accident. Piazzolla, then on tour in Puerto Rico, received the news and immediately went to his beloved bandoneon to grieve for his loss. The result was *Adiós Nonino*, reworked from parts of a tango he had written in 1954 (*Nonino*) and dedicated to his late father. A work of pure melancholy written by a man in deep mourning, *Adiós Nonino* has touched hearts the world over as an anthem of loss and longing for those in our past and has been widely adopted by Argentine diasporic communities as a symbol of home.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley



Left: Astor Piazzolla

Bottom: Claude Debussy

