

# The Singer's Library

## Des Chansons Renouvelées

BY BRIAN MANTERNACH

A new book provides a greater context for neglected French vocal literature.



**W**hen choosing recital repertoire, it is common for students to gravitate toward the most well established songs. Composers who receive the lion's share of ink in music history textbooks and song literature guides generally also have a large body of recordings available for study and comparison. It is easy, therefore, for young singers to assume that these widely circulated songs are the most important and best representatives of the culture and eras from which they came.

In *French Vocal Literature: Repertoire in Context*, author Georgine Resick makes a case for the lesser known, underappreciated literature by presenting its place in the lineage of world history, social movements, and musical evolution. Highlighting works for solo voice with keyboard accompaniment (piano or organ) or voice and small instrumental ensemble, Resick profiles music and composers from the 12th-century troubadours up to the present day.

A quote often attributed to children's TV host Mr. Rogers reads, "There isn't anyone you couldn't learn to love once you've heard their story." In this vein, Resick provides a context for neglected composers and repertoire that she hopes may inspire some long overdue *amour*, a perspective she shared with me in a recent interview.

**Your personal performance history includes opera, concert, and chamber music sung across the world as well as recital literature in several languages. With that extensive background, how did you decide to narrow your focus to French vocal literature for this book?**

I taught French vocal literature for many years at the University of Notre Dame, each time searching unsuccessfully for an appropriate textbook. It was when a colleague opined that I should translate what I considered a substandard book on the French *mélodie* that I decided I might as well write one myself.



Brian Manternach

### **When and how did you develop a passion for this repertoire?**

I began gravitating to French song in undergraduate school. My vocal studies with the Swiss-French singer Flore Wend for the artist's diploma at Peabody Conservatory cemented my attraction to the colorful French repertoire.

### **You write in the book that, for many people, the only French vocal composers considered noteworthy are Fauré, Duparc, Debussy, and Poulenc. Why do you think other French composers have not received similar acclaim?**

Fauré's comment (from 1905, the year he took over as director of the Paris Conservatoire) that singers tend to perform "the same songs over and over" was—and unfortunately still is—largely accurate. Once introduced to some of the repertoire I highlight and the circumstances of its composition, I think singers will find many treasures in the French repertoire.

**In addition to highlighting French social and political movements, you also outline the progression of other artistic genres, including dance, painting, the decorative arts, poetry, and literature. What will readers gain when viewing French vocal music alongside these other art forms?**


Until the 19th century, French music meant almost exclusively vocal music, an important cultural element that developed alongside rich social, political, and poetic traditions. Drawing connections among political/social culture and artistic trends—the continuing influence of the Parisian literary salons on music and politics, the fact that French opera developed out of a combination of various balletic theatrical forms beloved by Louis XIV, the impact of the 16th-century Pléiade poets and the Academy of Music and Poetry on the text setting of the succeeding generation, the importance of Watteau’s early 18th-century paintings to poetry and the *mélodie* in the 19th century, Poulenc’s intense identification with Apollinaire’s Cubist-influenced poetry, and the

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sinuous decorative lines of art nouveau translated into music by Debussy, to name a few examples—can’t help but stimulate the performer and enrich his or her performance.

**While discussing French prosody, you make a distinction between the word “stress” (used by many English speakers) and the French term “accent.” What is the difference between the two?**

In English the musical term “accent” refers to a type of attack; in French the word “accent” refers to stress within a word or word phrase and does not connote a sharp attack.



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## Book Review

With *French Vocal Literature: Repertoire in Context*, author Georgine Resick states the admirable goal of getting performers out of the “well trodden rut of ‘standard repertoire.’” Observing that most French composers, outside of a specific handful, are considered by many to be “endemic-ally saccharine,” she provides the background and context for readers



to understand and appreciate numerous underperformed French composers and their works.

Resick hopes the book may encourage a restoration of French song literature through republishing in modern critical editions in a way that has occurred with the music of other overlooked composers and eras. Many singers would find this to be a welcome addition to the literature.

The intended audience for the book, as articulated in the Introduction, broadly includes professional singers, vocal coaches, voice teachers, music literature teachers, and voice students. The text would be a natural fit for a college vocal literature course.

Resick's writing highlights the fact that, to some degree, we are all products of our environments. Most art will, therefore, reflect the social and political climate in which it was created, either overtly or subtly. *French Vocal Literature* reveals a succession of artistic language that can be observed only by understanding a composer's sphere of influence. With each page, readers will draw more lines of connection from historical and artistic points A to points B, uncovering how later composers either continued the trajectory set by their predecessors or intentionally moved in a different direction.

As a performer, Resick has long been a proponent of unknown and undervalued song literature. Many of these works, in numerous languages, have been recorded for her eight solo CDs. *French Vocal Literature* further establishes Resick's reputation as a champion of underestimated composers and their work by providing resources for future generations while honoring the legacy of generations past. —Brian Manternach

**Having taught French vocal literature for more than 20 years, how do you find students react to this music? Is it a more difficult “sell” than music of other regions and cultures?**

For us, song repertoire most often refers to the German Lied, rich in variety and poetic association. I always welcomed to my class students who professed to “hate French music.” I was delighted to discover that, though the style of every era might not resonate with them, without exception students found songs—and not always the most well known—they truly enjoyed, which made their way onto their recital programs.

**There is a companion website to the book at [www.FrenchVocalLiterature.com](http://www.FrenchVocalLiterature.com) that is being built as we speak. What resources will the website feature?**

The companion website will provide a discography and score publication information, including links for online scores and recordings, for every song discussed in the book. As well as serving performers, I hope to provide a one-stop shop for preparation for courses in French vocal literature, [including] a chronology of salient political and artistic events, a genealogy of royal dynasties and governments, and a French song “family tree” of musical influences.

**You mention in the Introduction that the book is not a performance guide. As such, you do not include translations, pronunciations, or other interpretive advice. Why did you choose to instead present a contextual guide?**

Other books in English on French song literature offer translations, pronunciation, and interpretive advice. None, however—at least to my knowledge—presents the contextual material, spanning the 12th to the 21st centuries, for which I thought there was a great need.

**Having provided the context for these songs, do you have plans to now write a performance guide?**

No. I provide Fach information where pertinent, but—unlike Fauré (!)—I am optimistic that singers will broaden their tastes. My goal, given that space limitations precluded a truly comprehensive approach, is to spur singers not only to read contextual material but also to seek out unusual or forgotten literature for themselves. In my experience, those who take the time to do so become more invested in their interpretation and performance.

*Brian Manternach's bio can be found on page 53.*

