





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.