volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

Parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi: Sharing Baudelaire's music

Helen Abbott

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2021

Date of Publication: 21 June 2021

Citation: Helen Abbott, 'Parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi: Sharing Baudelaire's music', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), 82–85.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1509.g1622

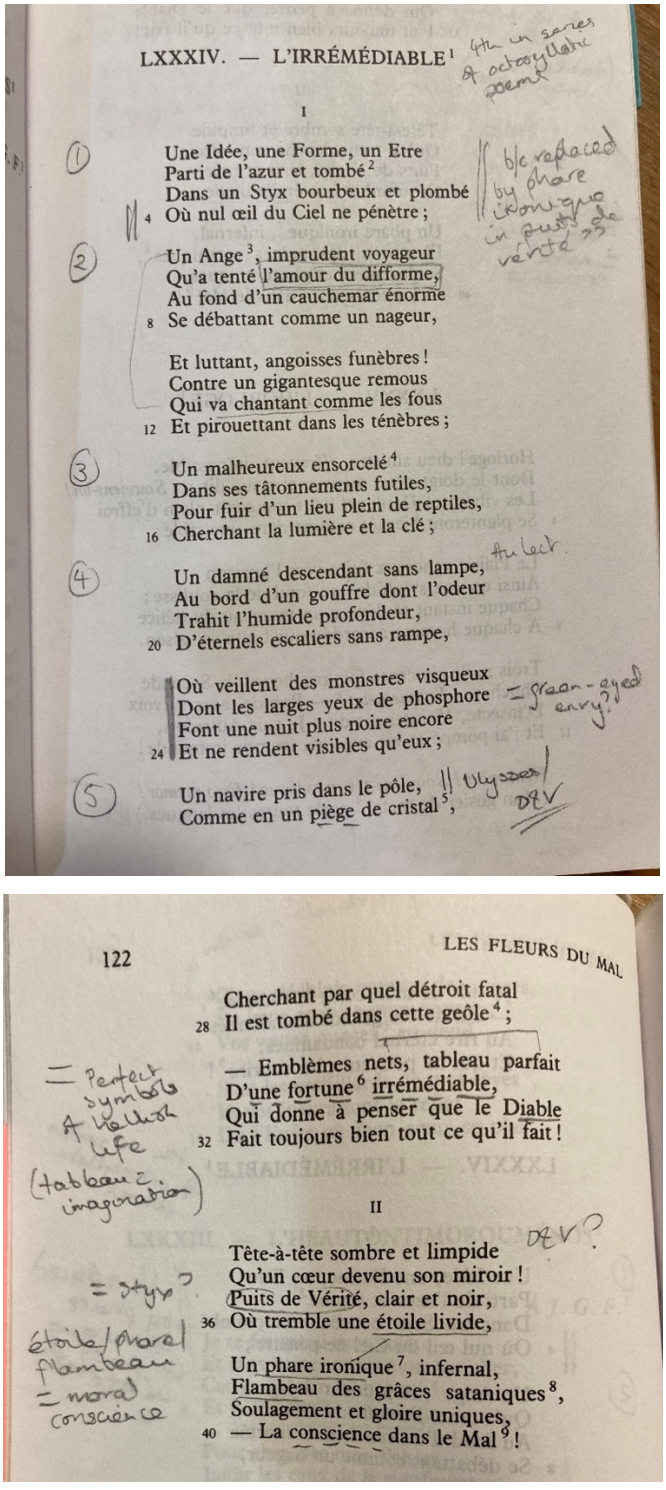
volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Parce que c'était lui; parce que c'était moi: Sharing Baudelaire's music

Helen Abbott
University of Birmingham

My first meeting with Baudelaire was through a Flammarion paperback edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Baudelaire was a 'set author' on the first-year syllabus of the French undergraduate degree programme I was embarking on. I had never encountered the poet's work before, though I had read some Hugo and Verlaine. At first, I hardly knew what to make of Baudelaire's writing. I found myself having to look up a lot of words in the dictionary – *le chemin bourbeux*, *le feston et l'ourlet*, *un grand reposoir*, *un siècle vaurien* – and started to build a picture of a poetic world that was strangely enticing. I still own that same paperback, which is filled with pencil scribbles, underlining ideas and concepts that inspired or confused, annotating unfamiliar meanings and connotations, and sketching out links between poems (fig. 1). In the flyleaf I once jotted down the words *vertige* – *gouffre* – *vide* and I created a kind of family tree that links Baudelaire – Wagner – Goya – Delacroix. Elsewhere, I find comments about *Dante et Virgile aux enfers*, the 1822 Delacroix painting that hangs in the Louvre, and which, when I saw it for the first time, reminded me somehow of Baudelaire's 'L'Irrémédiable', knowing as I did by then that Baudelaire had also written admiringly of Delacroix's work. Where images once emerged from the page, as I flick through the book now, I cannot help but hear tunes and melodies that have become associated with the poems. The opening line from 'Ciel brouillé' rings out in my head with the tempo and pitches of a song setting that I heard premiered in Paris in 2016. My copy also suggests that I once equated the opening stanza of 'Ciel brouillé' with 'L'Invitation au voyage', but now that poem is always attached to music for me, rather than to other poems or to other paintings.



LXXXIV. — L'IRRÉMÉDIABLE[1]

I

Une Idée, une Forme, un Etre
Parti de l'azur et tombé[2]
Dans un Styx bourbeux et plombé
Où nul œil du Ciel ne pénètre ;

Un Ange[3], imprudent voyageur
Qu'a tenté l'amour du difforme,
Au fond d'un cauchemar énorme
Se débattant comme un nageur,

Et luttant, angoisses funèbres !
Contre un gigantesque remous
Qui va chantant comme les fous
Et pirouettant dans les ténèbres ;

Un malheureux ensorcelé[4]
Dans ses tâtonnements futiles,
Pour fuir d'un lieu plein de reptiles,
Cherchant la lumière et la clé ;

Un damné descendant sans lampe,
Au bord d'un gouffre dont l'odeur
Trahit l'humide profondeur,
D'éternels escaliers sans rampe,

Où veillent des monstres visqueux
Dont les larges yeux de phosphore
Font une nuit plus noire encore
Et ne rendent visibles qu'eux ;

Un navire pris dans le pôle,
Comme en un piège de cristal[5],

Cherchant par quel détroit fatal
Il est tombé dans cette geôle[4] ;

— Emblèmes nets, tableau parfait
D'une fortune[6] irrémédiable,
Qui donne à penser que le Diable
Fait toujours bien tout ce qu'il fait !

II

Tête-à-tête sombre et limpide
Qu'un cœur devenu son miroir !
Puits de Vérité, clair et noir,
Où tremble une étoile livide,

Un phare ironique[7], infernal,
Flambeau des grâces sataniques[8],
Soulagement et gloire uniques,
— La conscience dans le Mal[9] !

Fig. 1: The author's annotated copy of 'L'Irrémédiable' from the GF-Flammarion 1991 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*

The resonances between Baudelaire's poetry and music are particularly strong for me these days. I first sang the 1870 Duparc setting of 'L'Invitation au voyage' as a student, deciphering the melody as I sight-read the score.[1] I've since also performed the 1863 Cressonnois version of 'L'Invitation au voyage' in lecture-recitals.[2] From experiences of singing Baudelaire emerged an interest in what else might be out there. Many other Baudelaire songs by Chabrier, Charpentier, Debussy, Fauré, Rollinat, and Vierne have now become deeply familiar to me through coaching professional singers, including for the 2017 *Voyages* album of Baudelaire settings spanning cabaret and classical music.[3] I've built playlists of Baudelaire pop songs to support the findings of the *Baudelaire Song Project*, which has uncovered over 1,700 song settings of Baudelaire's poems.[4] The trends we can observe in how Baudelaire 'speaks' to musicians are striking. Over 15% of the songs use the same four poems – 'L'Invitation au voyage', 'Recueillement', 'La Mort des amants', and 'Harmonie du soir' – whether in classical or pop music genres. But classical musicians have tended to favour the more complaisant texts, where rock and metal musicians have opted for the more subversive ones.

Baudelaire is a malleable poet, whose disdainfulness is balanced by seductiveness. The aura of the scandalous artist whose poems were banned has continued to attract so many people to Baudelaire, but so too has the prescience of a poet whose insights into the shocks of the modern world provide salient reality checks about the human condition. For me, Baudelaire has become a companion, a friend I like to introduce to others. His poems are not always comfortable. There are misanthropic and misogynistic overtones to some of his work, and some of the images he creates are quite repulsive. But the very uncomfortableness of Baudelaire's poetry is precisely what appeals to me. I might not like to hear the violent screeches of the 'Litanies de Satan' (as reimagined by Diamanda Galás, perhaps)[5] or the shouts of 'Imbécile!' in 'Le Vampire' (as reimagined by Susanna, perhaps),[6] but the disquiet that Baudelaire's language sets in train helps me to keep things real.

If some readers of Baudelaire have fetishized the poet's persona rather than his writings per se, such responses in fact operate in quite a Baudelairean way.[7] Baudelaire himself fetishized Wagner. His obsessive adulation for the opera composer is expressed in a letter dated 17 February 1860. Baudelaire writes 'il me semblait que cette musique était la mienne', in a manoeuvre that appropriates Wagner's music by claiming it as his own.[8] In eliding the composer's music with his own (despite a fundamental lack of technical musical prowess), Baudelaire sets in train the same operation of elision that others then do to his poetry. Composers and songwriters who appropriate his words for their own songs effectively claim Baudelaire's words as their own (and in 20% of Baudelaire songs they are in fact doing so through another language using translated lyrics). Understanding why Baudelaire's poetry has appealed to over 750 musicians and counting probably comes down to a process of recognition: that Baudelaire's poetry speaks to them in such a way that they want to take him into their own creative fold, even if, like me, they experience some discomfort in doing so. We might, then, understand Baudelaire's legacy as a form of amiable yet fractious companionship from which we can all get our own share.

---

[1] Henri Duparc, 'L'Invitation au voyage' (1870): https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W6515_GBAJY0652324.
[2] Jules Cressonnois, L'Invitation au voyage' (1873): https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dw.asp?dc=W6918_GBAJY0652301.
[3] Mary Bevan and Joseph Middleton, *Voyages* (Signum Classics, 2017). https://open.spotify.com/album/2URCWCwWlYDI6vRLOAUad2?si=3_WPj8GSQuGZ6Qo6U_4w4Q&nd=1.
[4] *The Baudelaire Song Project*: https://www.baudelairesong.org/search/.
[5] Diamanda Galás, 'Litanies of Satan': https://open.spotify.com/track/3Wij3Osx39agAHlNQYYVBk?si=TxrI0f_oQauGbfhR3YftAQ&nd=1.
[6] Susanna, 'The Vampire': https://open.spotify.com/album/6UMfvIFmpCpEJOD7RCYMZe?highlight=spotify:track:26xVKmTIBtCnDsknWp9nUd.
[7] On the concept of 'Baudelaire fétiche', see Mathilde Labbé, 'Baudelaire au centenaire des *Fleurs du mal*: Commémoration et lectures de circonstance', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 58:1 (2018), 74-86.
[8] Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, ed. by Claude Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1966-1973), II, p. 1452. Baudelaire's recognition of himself in Wagner's music is also described as a process of anamnesis, as per Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta (Figures de Wagner)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), pp. 61-62.