

The Transcriber's Art - #41  
Richard Yates  
*Poème d'Amour #1 and #2, Jules Massenet*

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*"I have tried to say with music what you say with words ... I think and feel in music and I should like to think and feel the same things as you."* — Maurice Ravel, quoted by Jules Renard, 1907.

Music began with the human voice, and despite the passage of millennia we have devised no instrument to match it. Acoustically it embodies a continuously modulated timbre and an infinite variety of articulation. Its connection to our feelings and thoughts is direct and immediate rather than mediated by the awkward, mechanical interfaces we call instruments. While we guitarists may comfort ourselves with the description of our "little orchestra," the disparity in expressive resources between the voice and any instrument is humbling. When one adds to this the unique ability of the voice to convey words, it is not surprising that transcription of vocal works to the guitar is difficult.

And yet there are some aspects of vocal music that commend it for transcription. The typical pitch range of a song is narrower than most instruments and so it suits the solo guitar's need to encompass both melody and accompaniment. Songs are usually of shorter duration and moderate tempo, and have an overall scale that matches the guitar well. While there certainly are exceptions, in general, the priority given to the vocal melody precludes undue complexity in the accompaniment and suggests that simplifications to it can be made without detriment to the whole.

Thus the transcription of songs simultaneously presents attractive, congenial features and daunting challenges.

### *Mélie*

The French art songs that developed beginning in the mid 19th century came to be called "*mélodies*." They are contrasted with the German *Lied* in that they have, in Debussy's words, "clarity of expression, precision and concentration of form." They are typically more subtle and restrained in expression, valuing refinement over excessive display. *Mélodies* also show a close and carefully constructed relationship between lyrics and melody. This artistic melding of rhythm in words and melody is termed *prosody*. Nearly all French composers of the period wrote *mélodies*, but deserving particular mention are Ravel, Debussy, Fauré and the composer of the two songs in this issue of *Soundboard* — Jules Massenet (1842–1912). Massenet is best known for his vocal music, which includes a couple dozen operas and more than 250 songs. *Poème d'Amour* is one of eight song cycles composed by Massenet. It includes six songs set to poems by Paul Robiquet, a prominent historian, political essayist and philosopher.

Massenet's attention to lyrics is a topic deserving a dissertation by itself, and indeed one was written by Eunhee Chae at the University of North Texas in 2000. "In terms of the composer's treatment of prosody, Jules Massenet distinguishes himself in his *mélodies*, wrote Chae. "His musical prosody reveals idiosyncratic styles, which establish a balance between poetry and music.... The melody and rhythm in his *mélodies* show his originality at a high level, focusing on the prosody of phonetic, syntactic and semantic features."

## Translation and Word Painting

With Massenet's songs we are confronted with an additional obstacle—the lyrics are in French. Alain Reiher, a guitar composer and native French speaker, provided me with a literal English translation. I then adjusted the lyrics to match the prosody of the original while maintaining the meaning. In Massenet's musical score the phrase lengths, meters, rhythmic figures and individual note durations carefully match those of the lyrics. Notice that in the second song measures with 4/4 and 3/2 time signatures are used to match the different lengths of phrases in the poem. There is also considerable use of word painting to forge an even tighter unity of words and music. In word painting the composer aims to make a close connection between specific words and melody notes or harmony. Of the many subtle touches of word painting in this song cycle I have selected two as examples: In measure 18 of the first song, when the cypresses "bowed their crowns," the tempo slows, the harmonic density increases, and the texture thickens over a descending bass line. The image of the majestic trees bowing is unmistakable. At measure 18 of the second song, the word "mad" is set to a dense, dissonant and remote C sharp dominant seventh chord where the expected chord was C major. The chord Massenet used is indeed a little mad. Examining the musical score in close context with the lyrics was necessary throughout the process of making the solo guitar transcription.

## Transcription

But, if a song is so intimately entwined with its lyrics how is a transcriber for solo guitar to convey all this to the performer? If the lyrics are an essential feature, how can we carry them over into an instrumental piece? The first impulse—to just ignore the problem, fit the melody and accompaniment to the guitar, and hope it can stand by itself—is not satisfying. And not many classical guitarists would want a vocoder installed, so direct expression of the lyrics is impossible! But lyrics can still play an important role, albeit an indirect one. The first step is to become thoroughly familiar with the way the lyrics and music interact to reinforce each other. Certainly the performance of the piece can benefit from such study as the examples I cite, but how is the transcriber to present this? One solution is to include the lyrics in verse form. The player can then see what the song is about and grasp the general feeling tone. My collection of Thomas Morley's Canzonets ([www.yatesguitar.com/GFA/Morley.pdf](http://www.yatesguitar.com/GFA/Morley.pdf)) used this approach, but that example, with its contrapuntal textures and frequent repetition of words and phrases did not have the meticulous prosody and word painting that Massenet uses to such wonderful effect.

The only way to communicate all the necessary information is to include the lyrics under the staff, as in the original song. The performance on solo guitar can thus be fully informed by the lyrics, and so, for this issue's transcriptions, I have taken the unusual step of presenting the score in this way. Please note that I am not recommending that publishers of transcribed songs adopt this format, but for this article I think it helps illustrate the importance and essential influence of the lyrics on the guitar transcription and, especially, the performance. Parenthetically, although it was not my original intention, you might also use this score with a singer to perform it as an accompanied song. If you have absorbed what you want from the versions printed here, but prefer scores without lyrics and page turns, you can download the scores from my website at [www.yatesguitar.com/GFA/Massenet.pdf](http://www.yatesguitar.com/GFA/Massenet.pdf).

## Fingering

Although the level of difficulty of these transcriptions is quite moderate, there are a few places where the fingering can use some explanation.

In measure 18 of the first song, you will find it helpful to leave the 2 finger on the F sharp from the chord that ends measure 17. It is then firmly on the first string as a guide finger for the shift up the chord on the second eighth beat.

Also in the first song, at measure 23 the 2 finger on G is most conveniently placed early with the last note of the previous measure. This secures the stretch and barré of measure 23.

The fingering of the third half-note beat of measure 6 of the second song seems unusual, but is much preferred to a more natural fingering (using the 1, 2 and 3 fingers) because it makes an otherwise tricky shift to the next chord quite easy. The 3 and 4 fingers can remain in place while the 1 slides back one fret and the 2 comes down on the B on the fifth string.

Beginning in measure 10 of the second song, the music divides into three distinct voices. The fingerings have been chosen to enable the note durations to be sustained for their full values. Take special care to place the fingertips vertically to avoid damping adjacent, sounding strings.

The chord change from measure 22 to measure 23 of the second song has a stretch that risks buzzing the top note. I hedge the risk a bit by switching the 2 finger onto the second string E on the last eighth note of measure 22. This fingering secures the shift quite well. Although it does stop the E prematurely, it is not noticeable because the E is the fifth of the chord and because it is strongly present in the overtone series of the bass note A.

Please send any comments or suggestions to:

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# Poème d'Amour

Transcribed for guitar  
by Richard Yates

#1

Jules Massenet  
(1842–1912)

Mouv. modéré - avec un sentiment intime et simple

Je me suis plaint aux tour - te - rel - les,  
I have com-plainted to tur - tle doves and

5 Les tour - te - rel - les ont gé - mi, Et la ca - res - se de leurs ai - les  
the tur - tle doves all moaned to me. And the ca - res - ses of their wings have

9 m'a con - so - lé comme un a - mi. J'ai con - té ma dou - leur au chê - ne,  
con - soled me well just like a friend. I have told my des - pair to oak trees

13 Le chêne, au cœur dur, fut tou - ché. Les cy - près ont com - pris ma pei - ne,  
The oak trees' own hard hearts were touched. The cy - pres - ses have known my sor - row,

17 Et vers moi leur front s'est pen - ché. Le zé - phyr, eff - leu - rant mon â - me,  
And towards me they bowed their crowns. The soft bree - zes did brush my soul, —

21

Bien tris - te - ment a mur - mu - ré: Mais qui m'a gué - ri? C'est la  
 Ve - ry sad - ly they whis - pered this: But who has cured me? 'Twas the

24

un peu retenu  
 fem - me! Quand je pleu - rais, elle a pleu - ré!  
 wo - man! When - e'er I wept, She al - so wept.

## #2

### Calme, recueilli, mais sans lenteur

⑥=D

La nuit, sans doute, é - tait trop bel - le,  
 The night, no doubt, was much too love - ly,

3

le ciel trop bleu, J'eus tort d'ad - mir - er a - vec el - le,  
 the sky too blue, I'm wrong to ad - mire next to her

6

L'oeu - vre de Dieu. C'é - tait dans les nids de ver - du - re  
 the work of God. There were in the nests filled with green - ery

9

Trop de chan-sons!  
Too ma - ny songs!

L'é - toi - le bril - lait  
The star shone bright

11

*en animant peu à peu*

— trop pu - re,  
— and pure - ly,

Sur les ga - zons!  
on the soft lawns!

Oui, c'est ta fau - te,  
Yes, it is your fault,

14

*cresc.*

Ô nuit se - rei - ne,  
O still se - rene night,

Si son beau cou,  
Her love - ly neck,

Son front  
her pale

pa - le,  
vi - sage,

ses yeux de  
her ro - yal

17

reine M'ont ren - du fou.  
eyes ren - der me mad.

La nuit, sans doute,  
The night, no doubt,

20

— é - tait trop bel - le,  
— is much too love - ly,

le ciel trop bleu,  
the sky too blue,

La nuit, sans doute, é - tait trop  
The night, no doubt, is much too

23

bel - le, le ciel trop bleu!  
love - ly, the sky too blue!