

Notes of introduction to the “Songs and sonnets of travellers: Chopin, Viardot, Liszt” concert (7th July 2022, Hong Kong)

Imagine you are in Paris. It’s sometime in the 1830s. You’re at a salon. You’ve been listening intently to music similar to what you’ve heard this evening. It’s *the* place to be – you’re among the cultured elite.

There is the Polish young man Frédéric Chopin and his friendly rival the Hungarian Franz Liszt. There is also a musician who you may not have heard of was very well known at the time: Pauline Viardot. She was a singer that took the European operatic scene by storm, performing not only in the Parisian musical circles but all across Europe. She collaborated with many of the foremost musicians of the time, including both Chopin and Liszt.

The French composer Camille Saint-Saëns dedicated his most famous opera, *Samson et Dalila* to Viardot; you heard one of its arias earlier in this concert, and later on you’ll hear a well-known song by Gabriel Fauré that was probably inspired by Pauline Viardot’s knowledge of Italian poetry.

Both Saint-Saëns and Fauré were “regulars” at what was known as the “Viardot circle”. What was it like at one of Viardot’s salons? Here is what Saint-Saëns’ has to say about Pauline:

“Her voice was enormously powerful, had a prodigious range and was equal to every technical difficulty but, marvelous as it was, it did not please everybody. It was not a velvet or crystalline voice, but rather rough, compared by someone to the taste of a bitter orange, and

made for tragedy or myth, superhuman rather than human ... “

Pauline was also a composer. You heard some of her songs this evening. Her talent was recognized by none other than Liszt himself:

“Her works” he writes, “contain so much tender and delicate feeling, so much skill in harmonic subtleties (which would be envied by many famous composers), that we must regret that Mme Viardot has not invested more effort in her talent as a composer; it is our hope that these sparks of genius so close to the inspiration of Chopin turn into a flame.”

As for Chopin, not only did he play with Pauline in public concerts, they were good friends who also played together in private. In fact, Pauline sang at Chopin’s funeral in Paris. The literary figure George Sand, like Liszt, used the word “genius” to describe Pauline.

Sand also wrote about Viardot’s influence on Chopin:

“The warmth of feeling that existed between Pauline and Chopin was based on reciprocal esteem and affinity of temperament. The friendship also happened to be one of mutual artistic benefit. Pauline was given expert advice by Chopin on her piano playing, her vocal compositions, and her arrangements of some of his Mazurkas as songs. On Chopin’s side, he derived from Pauline some firsthand knowledge about Spanish music. One may also conjecture that he developed through her a keener understanding and appreciation of the human voice as a musical instrument.”

Liszt was one of Pauline's piano teachers in her younger days and he kept up a long correspondence with Pauline in later life, writing letters of reference, commenting on musical happenings and so on. Their friendship was partly based on their mutual cosmopolitan nature. You can literally hear this cosmopolitanism in Pauline's music: she wrote songs in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian. In this, she was very much like Liszt, who has commented on this aspect of Pauline's sympathies in 1859:

"With her Spanish temperament, her French upbringing and her German sympathies, she unites the characteristics of different nations within herself to such an extent that one would not wish to concede an exclusive claim to her on the part of any particular country, but to name art as the fatherland of her free choice and love."

With that, let's continue our imaginary Parisienne Salon in HK ... imagine Pauline singing Fauré songs with Fauré at the piano ...

(written by Sylvia Chan; edited by DKL Chua)