

09. Aubade-Habanera

(pub. posth. 1905)

Augusta Holmès

(1847-1903)

arr. William Melton

Holmès, Augusta

(born Paris, December 16, 1847; died Paris, January 28, 1903)

Augusta Mary-Anne Holmès was the daughter of Scottish-Irish Tryphena Shearer and the Anglo-Irish Major Charles Holmes, who had served at Waterloo. Augusta's godfather, and rumored father, was the poet Alfred de Vigny. Despite early demonstration of pianistic talent, the girl was not permitted to study at the Conservatoire, and instead turned to the private teachers Henri Lambert, the organist of Versailles Cathedral, and the clarinetist Hyacinthe Klosé. She was also introduced to Gioachino Rossini and Franz Liszt and began composition lessons with César Franck. Holmès would regard Franck as a dear mentor, writing at his death in 1890,

He is no longer, he is no more! Our Father, the Master,
The gentle visaged sage, the pure hearted genius
Who wrote down the songs of heavenly angels,
Sleeps the daunting sleep from which no one returns!

But listen. I saw death, who said:
"Do not cry...for when a great spirit leaves the earth,
It journeys to a splendid home,
And heaven's dazzling light rays shine
Upon the simple and the enlightened."

Holmès distinguished herself in several competitions and wrote her first opera *Héro et Léandre* in 1875. Her initial three attempts in the genre, to her own libretti, went unperformed. In fact her early compositions had to be published under the *nom de plume* Hermann Zenta to conceal the woman behind them. Though Holmès' fourth opera *La montagne noire* was produced at the Paris Opéra in 1895, it was not a success. Undeterred, she composed 12 symphonic poems and earned praise for her large choral works – the *Ode triomphale* for the centenary of the Revolution called for a 300 head orchestra and 900 singers. Ultimately Holmès was best known for her commanding profile in Parisian artistic circles. In that rarified world she was admired by musicians like Charles Gounod, Vincent d'Indy, and Ambroise Thomas, and writers Victor Hugo, Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and Stéphane Mallarmé. She refused numerous offers of marriage, including one from Camille Saint-Saëns. Instead, ignoring social convention, Holmès shared a partnership with the poet and Wagnerian Catulle Mendès from 1869 to 1886, and five children resulted from their union (a portrait of their three daughters at the piano was painted by Renoir).

Holmès the composer is now remembered chiefly for her 128 songs. In *Aubade-Habanera* (Paris: Heugel & Cie, 1898; Plate No. 19183), the gentle dawn serenade is spiced by the addition of Habanera dance rhythms. Biographer René Pichard du Page concluded that Holmès was motivated by “the inner drive of one who is in love with the ideal and anxious to express and sing her song.” Ethel Smyth, with her trademark bluntness, observed that Holmès’ music offered “jewels wrought by one who evidently was not among the giants, but for all that knew how to cut a gem.”

Text by William Melton