

18. Le Noël des oiseaux (1893)

Cécile Chaminade
(1857-1944)
arr. William Melton

Chaminade, Cécile

(Born August 8, 1857 in Paris; died April 13, 1944 in Monte Carlo)

Her mother Marie Stephanie Chaminade was a singer and pianist, while her father Hippolyte was a businessman and a talented amateur violinist. Hippolyte saw to it that Cécile's teachers were engaged privately to avoid the publicity and contention of a woman taking a place at the Conservatoire. Fortunately these teachers were a distinguished group, and included Félix Lecoupey for piano, the Belgian Martin-Pierre-Joseph Marsick for violin (teacher to Carl Flesch, Jacques Thibaud and Georges Enescu), Augustin Savard for harmony and counterpoint (teacher to Jules Massenet and Edward MacDowell), and the excellent but short-lived Benjamin Godard for composition. After Cécile impressed establishment figures like Georges Bizet and Ambroise Thomas (who proclaimed, "C'est n'est pas une jeune fille qui compose, c'est un compositeur" – "This is no young girl who composes, this is a composer"), she launched into a concert career marked by such success in England and America – where she debuted in 1908 with the Philadelphia Orchestra – that she inspired the founding of many "Chaminade Clubs" as the composer of popular salon and student pieces.

James Francis Cooke praised Chaminade in 1910 as "the first musician of her sex to attain wide renown as a composer; her best-known work is [...] filled with such original and fascinating musical ideas that it won her wide fame." A high point was her selection as the first woman to receive the title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor in 1913. But failing health dogged Chaminade after the First World War, and she retired from concert tours, moved south to Monaco and died there in 1944. Her reputation continued its wane as the 20th century progressed, with *The New Grove* (1980) dismissing her as a lower tier composer: "Notwithstanding the real charm and clever writing of many of Chaminade's pieces they do not rise above drawing-room music." The German musical encyclopedia, *MGG*, was even more dismissive: Chaminade was simply left out of their first edition (1949-1986). These dismal judgments are still in the process of being revised today.

Yet Cécile Chaminade was also the composer of major works, including the comic opera *La Sévillane*, the ballet *Callirhoé*, a mass, the lyric symphony *Les amazones*, a Concertstück for piano and orchestra, 2 orchestral suites, and 2 piano trios. None approached the popularity of her more than 200 memorable works for solo piano, still very much part of the student repertory, though Chaminade's c. 135 songs have also been praised, Edward Baxter Perry writing in 1899,

Singularly enough, however, it is in her songs that Chaminade reaches her highest level. These are all melodious and, in the best sense of the term, effective [...] and giving the audience an intelligible, well-balanced, and fully developed expression of some definite and concrete artistic idea. They are sensuously beautiful, if you will, but genuinely musical, with melodies that not only can be sung, but that almost sing themselves, and thrill the listener.

The song "Le Noël des oiseaux" ("Carol of the Birds," Catalog No. ICC 124), to a text by Armand Silvestre, was published by Enoch Frères et Costallat of Paris in 1893 (Plate No. 2230), and G. Schirmer of New York a year later (Plate No. 12058). The bustling prelude and postlude enclose the more relaxed strophic verses of what Robin Smith called "This delightful little song" (DM Dissertation, Indiana University, 2012).

Petit Jésus, maître du ciel,
Que les anges chantant Noël
Veillent sous leurs blancheurs ailées,
Viens donc, viens donc pour les petits oiseaux
Qui frissonnent au bord des eaux gelées

Bonnes gens qui sur le chemin
Passez, un rosaire à la main,
Dont l'âme ades avés pour ailes,
Priez, priez pour les petits oiseaux
Dont la neige a trempé les os Si frères.

Cloches sonores au doux bruit,
Qui pour la messe de minuit
Au fond de l'air tinte agiles,
Sonnez, sonnez pour les petits oiseaux
Les nids sont frères des berceaux Fragiles.

Beaux anges, nos frères ailés,
Qui près de la crèche volez,
Vous que Dieu sur la terre envoie,
Apportez, apportez aux petits oiseaux
Grelottant parmi les Roseaux La joie.

*Little Jesus, master of heaven,
May the angels singing Christmas
Watch under their winged whiteness,
Approach, approach for the little birds
Who are shivering at the edge of frozen waters.*

*Good people who on the way
Pass, a rosary in hand,
Whose souls will soon fly upwards,
Pray, pray for the little birds
Whose bones are soaked with snow.*

*Ring the bells with sweet sound,
that for the midnight mass
resound in the agile air,
Ring, ring for small birds
Whose fragile nests are like cradles.*

*Beautiful angels, our winged brothers,
Who near the manger fly,
You whom God on earth sends,
Bring, bring to the little birds
Joy as they shiver among the reeds.*

Text by William Melton