Isabelle Aboulker's Femmes en Fables: Contemporary French Music and the Young Singer

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Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, voice teachers, tasked with encouraging healthy, productive vocal development through appropriate repertoire selection, have been wary of assigning more contemporary pieces to young singers due to the canon’s justifiable reputation for difficult vocal lines. The music of Isabelle Aboulker (b. 1938) provides voice teachers with contemporary French repertoire that not only promotes good vocal technique but also introduces young singers to the French musical canon.

This dissertation is intended not only to recommend Aboulker and her works to a wider audience but to illuminate her works’ suitability for the voice, thus encouraging thoughtful voice teachers to consider assigning her music to undergraduate singers. In order to make the case, I first establish a definition for “good” vocal writing. Secondly, to determine what makes a piece well suited for a young singer, I examine the technical demands placed on the singer by various compositional elements such as range, tessitura, text/melodic setting, harmony, and use of legato and leaps. To determine how these compositional elements apply to Aboulker’s vocal work, I create a rubric which I apply to her set of songs Femmes en Fables, a collection of four fables written by the seventeenth-century poet and fabulist Jean de la Fontaine: “La jeune veuve,” “La femme noyée,” “La chatte métamorphosée en femme,” and “La cigale et la fourmi.”
Isabelle Aboulker's *Femmes en Fables*: Contemporary French Music and the Young Singer

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Isabelle Aboulker's Femmes en Fables: Contemporary French Music and the Young Singer

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Chapter One

Introduction

For musicians, nothing brings more joy than to discover new, exciting repertoire. In the case of vocal music, each historical epoch introduced new techniques and demands on the voice. Monteverdi and Mozart, for instance, raised the art of music to unprecedented heights in very different ways; later, the vast operas of Wagner stretched the voice to new limits, while the music of Schoenberg and other composers of the twentieth century brought fresh challenges relating to atonality and, later, extended vocal techniques. Unfortunately, despite the wide breadth of vocal music, the repertoire of a young singer can often feel limiting. As a knowledgeable voice teacher guides their student in technique and musicality, it seems more “interesting” repertoire must wait until the voice matures. Thus, throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, voice teachers have been wary of assigning more contemporary repertoire to young singers, due to the contemporary canon’s justifiable reputation for difficult vocal lines. Complex melodies and harmonies can distract the burgeoning musician from developing their technique (some extremely demanding vocal music may actual hinder a student’s technical development). Although this wariness is sometimes well founded, many contemporary composers throughout the world have created works that can stimulate rather than hinder the development of younger singers; French composer and pianist Isabelle Aboulker has done just that.

1 Throughout this paper, the term “young singer” refers to students at the undergraduate level, ages 18 to 22.
Isabelle Aboulker (b. 1938), has spent much of her career teaching and working with singers, and she has developed a deep appreciation and love for the human voice, inspiring her to compose works that can be performed by a wide range of vocalists. A prolific composer, she has created operas, musical comedies, chamber operas, oratorios, songs, instrumental works, choral works, and children’s music, in addition to writing three pedagogical books, including a musicianship manual and two volumes for teaching solfège to singers. Considering her love of the voice, it is unsurprising that, despite the varied nature of her output, the voice is her primary compositional focus. This love has made her one of the greatest living composers of vocal music, and Aboulker’s popularity and influence continue to rise in France to this day.

This dissertation is intended not only to introduce Aboulker and her works to a wider audience, but to illuminate why her works are well suited for the voice, and thus to encourage thoughtful voice teachers to consider assigning her music to undergraduate singers. In order to make the case that her works are well suited for the voice, we must first establish what makes “good” vocal writing. Secondly, to determine what makes a piece well suited for a young singer, we must examine the technical demands placed on the singer by various compositional elements such as range, tessitura, text/melodic setting, harmony, and use of legato and leaps.

To determine how these compositional elements may apply to Aboulker’s vocal work, I will create a rubric which will then be applied to her set of songs Femmes en Fables, a collection of four fables written by the seventeenth-century poet and fabulist Jean de la Fontaine: “La jeune veuve,” “La femme noyée,” “La chatte métamorphosée en femme,” and “La cigale et la fourmi.”

Although Aboulker has set many of La Fontaine’s fables, these four are of particular

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interest. In addition to all focusing on female protagonists, these four songs present vocal
challenges that go beyond those posed by Aboulker’s other settings of the fables, yet still remain
suitable for younger voices, thus making the set an excellent example of the vocal suitability of
Aboulker’s work.

The second chapter in this dissertation will present a biographical sketch of Isabelle
Aboulker. While a number of articles and interviews with Aboulker in French have appeared in
print, few English texts focus on Aboulker or her music; the two most substantial are both
dissertations, one discussing her unaccompanied bassoon pieces Jeux de notes, Nos. 13 and 14,
the other on her operatic repertoire. Yet, even in French, there is limited comprehensive
biographical information. Although she has gained recognition in the United States due to her
association with the Franco-American Vocal Academy, she remains relatively unknown,
therefore necessitating the provision of biographical information on her life and works. This
chapter will also place her within the wider context of contemporary French music so that the
reader is able to understand her motivations, influences, and contributions to vocal repertoire.

The third chapter explores what constitutes “good” vocal writing pedagogically.
Technical issues facing singers in the creation of an optimal sound are discussed, in addition to
issues facing composers when writing for the voice. In addition, the chapter offers a detailed
examination of the compositional elements a voice teacher should consider when choosing

3 Kirsten Marie Nelson. "A Performer's Guide to Published Music for Unaccompanied Solo
Bassoon by Women Composers." Order No. 9817854, University of Georgia, 1997.
Patricia Beatrice O'Keefe, "Selected Operas of Isabelle Aboulker as Repertoire for the
University Opera Studio," Order No. 3727291, University of North Texas, 2014.
repertoire for their students. This will create a rubric with which to analyze Femmes en Fables and thus determine its suitability for the young singer. It should be noted this study will focus on a piece’s compositional elements and relies on the voice teacher’s good judgment regarding their individual student’s vocal development and ability.

The final chapters introduce Jean de la Fontaine, the fables that comprise Femmes en Fables, and an analysis of Aboulker’s setting of those works. The application of the rubric created in Chapter Three will allow us to determine in what ways Aboulker’s works are well suited for the voice and in what circumstances they should be recommended for young singers.
Chapter Two

Biography of Isabelle Aboulker

Early Life

Isabelle Aboulker was born into a world of deep unrest, on the brink of the Second World War. For the first seven years of Aboulker’s life, France, along with most of Europe and numerous other countries around the globe, was embroiled in military conflicts, German occupation, political upheaval, and displaced governments. German forces invaded France on May 10, 1940, and Paris, the seat of French artistic influence, was occupied by June 14 of the same year. Few events in our history have had so profound an impact on the musical life of France and Europe as did the Second World War, and Aboulker and her family were not immune to the war’s impact.4

Aboulker was born on October 23, 1938, the second child of Marcel Aboulker and Marie-Thérèse Février in the small Parisian suburb of Boulogne-Billancourt to the west of Paris’s fifteenth arrondissement. Her sister, Florence, was born four years earlier. At the outset of World War II, Marcel, an Algerian Jew, recognized the impending danger for Jewish people and moved the family to his home country of Algeria. Her mother, a French bourgeois accustomed to the glamorous lifestyle of pre-war Paris, became disenchanted with the family’s situation in Algeria, and she began to engage in extramarital affairs. This caused great domestic discord and Aboulker has more memories of fighting in her home than the fighting in the war.5 After peace

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4 There are relatively few sources about Isabelle Aboulker. I will cite them when appropriate but most information comes from Isabelle Aboulker. Isabelle Aboulker, Interview by author, Perigueux, France, July 29, 2013.
5 Marie-Claude Tanguy, “Isabelle Aboulker,” in Compositrices françaises au XXème siècle, ed. by Pierrette Germain (Sampzon, France: Delatour, 2007), 27.
was declared in 1945, the family returned to Paris, where her parents divorced. Aboulker’s father was given custody of the two children, Isabelle and Florence – a rare occurrence even in today’s society, but especially rare in the 1940s. Aboulker lived with her father, sister, and governess and only saw her mother twice a week.

On her mother’s side, Aboulker is descended from an extremely musical family. Her grandfather, Henry Février (1875-1957), was a prolific opera composer and student of Massenet and Fauré. His most notable work was the opera Monna Vanna composed in 1909, to a libretto by Maurice Maeterlinck based on his play of the same name.6 Maeterlinck’s works were the basis for a number of other compositions by composers such as Claude Debussy, Arnold Schoenberg, and Jean Sibelius. Aboulker describes her grandfather’s music as quintessentially French, exactly in the style of Massenet. Her uncle, Jacques Février (1900-1979), was a world renowned concert pianist and champion of contemporary French music. He was a frequent duet partner of Francis Poulenc, most famously for the debut of Poulenc’s Concerto in D minor for two pianos. He was also selected by Maurice Ravel to perform his Concerto for the left hand.7 Although Aboulker believes that her innate musical talent comes from her mother’s side of the family, her maternal family members never encouraged her to study music.

Aboulker was a sweet child and her family was content with her average achievements. In fact, the difficult circumstance of her parents’ relationship meant Aboulker was often a second thought. She was never encouraged to excel in any of her studies or even to make good grades.

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Aboulker’s natural musical talent meant she excelled at improvisation, easily playing a song on the piano after hearing it once. However, she had no diligence in her practice for more difficult repertoire. Although her family always praised her when she played, the little guidance she was given turned her into a good pianist, but not a great one.

At the end of the war, as Aboulker came to terms with her parents’ divorce, France began to rebuild. In 1945, a thirty-year period of economic prosperity and industrial renewal commonly referred to as *Les Trente glorieuses* began. Jean Fourasitié, a French economist who coined the term *Les Trente glorieuses*, concluded that “this great adventure of development is truly, for better or worse, the advent of a new humanity.”\(^8\) It is in this new society that Aboulker came of age, even while her life was marked with more heartbreak.

At age 14, Aboulker’s life changed dramatically when her father died. Forever angry with his ex-wife for her infidelities, Marcel ensured that in the event of his death, Aboulker and her sister would not live with their mother, instead entrusting them to their governess. Again, young Isabelle’s wellbeing and success suffered at the hands of her parents’ unhappy relationship. Aboulker’s disposition inclined her to work hard—she enjoyed it—and she felt profoundly the absence of an encouraging adult. Luckily, Aboulker’s father had remarried, and after her father’s death her step-mother’s sister took a particular interest in teenage Isabelle. She looked at Aboulker, fatherless and divided from her mother, and decided to help find her a path: serious musical study. She hired a piano teacher for Aboulker who challenged her, eventually pushing Aboulker to enter the Paris Conservatoire. With the encouragement of her new piano teacher and

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family, Aboulker made the cutoff date to enter the conservatoire by 13 days, effectively changing the course of her life.

The Paris Conservatoire

In order to understand Aboulker’s place in French musical history, one must briefly consider the compositional approaches prevalent at the Paris Conservatoire in the years leading up to and following the Second World War. After the catastrophe of World War I, a resistance to Austro-German music and to Romanticism more broadly, which had developed among French composers after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, intensified. There was little interest in the atonality and twelve-tone serialism of the Second Viennese School during the interwar years. Instead, most composers in France, especially the group of 'Les Six' (Georges Auric, Louis Durey, Arthur Honegger, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc and Germaine Tailleferre), and including the Russian emigré Stravinsky, cultivated a neoclassical style, frequently colored by jazz and other modern popular music. While this could range from intense seriousness to deliberately frivolous ironic detachment, for many listeners the latter seemed to dominate. That said, there was a diversity of opinions about the right path forward for French music, and debate intensified after 1945 when an engagement with new kinds of modernism began, including an interest in twelve-tone music. Nevertheless, a sense of an authentic French tradition did persist across these differences, centered primarily on the music of Debussy and Ravel; according to Caroline Potter, “perhaps the only conviction shared by French composers active just after the Second World War was the belief that Debussy and Ravel are the pre-eminent French composers
of the early years of the twentieth century, and that all subsequent composers have to come to terms with their impact.”

One of the most influential teachers at the Paris Conservatoire during Aboulker’s time was Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992). Messiaen first joined the Paris Conservatoire faculty in 1941 as a professor of harmony. Although he did not start teaching composition at the Conservatoire until 1966, he was already a well-known composer, and through his life we can see the development of the compositional trends at the Paris Conservatoire through the 1950s and 1960s when Aboulker was a student.

When a student himself, Messiaen was introduced to the music of the Second Viennese School, but he never fully embraced their methods. Messiaen’s style was deeply rooted in the traditions of the French composers, and he preferred the works of Debussy and the rhythmic style of Stravinsky. An extremely religious man, he believed that music should be illustrative, and thus his lifelong goal in composing was “to manifest the doctrines of the Christian faith.”

Messiaen experienced first-hand the dramatic musical changes of the twentieth century. As early as 1927 in his work Esquisse modale, Messiaen experimented with a new form of composition he named “modes of limited transposition.” Like Debussy, Messiaen was fascinated by scales that lay outside of major and minor tonality and constantly looked for new ways to use these scales and modes. Messiaen “did not simply resurrect the modes of antiquity, but discovered new, unmistakably modern-sounding modes with their own distinctive qualities…partly enabling the release of melody and harmony from the conventional approach to

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the temporal domain." In the 1930s, Messiaen along with André Jolivet, Daniel-Lesure and Yves Baudrier, reacting to neo-classicism, formed La Jeune France, aiming to re-emphasize passion and sensuality in music. In the mid-1940s, in defiance of the academically rigid Conservatoire curriculum that discouraged modern experimentation, Messiaen began giving private composition and analysis classes to Conservatoire students outside the Conservatoire. Messiaen introduced these students to the techniques of the Second Viennese School and also to his own methods (which he compiled in his book Technique de mon langage musical). Pierre Boulez, Serge Nigg, and Yvonne Loriod were all among this group of students. As early as the 1940s, Messiaen’s influence moved the compositional trends of France away from the tonal music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries toward the suspension of and absence of tonality. By the time Aboulker arrived at the Paris Conservatoire, Messiaen’s influence pervaded the compositional style in the school.

During her time at the Conservatoire in the mid 1950’s, Aboulker chose to focus on solfège studies instead of composition, harmony, or piano performance. Although Aboulker was interested in composition from the time she was a small girl (she wanted to compose music for her father’s short comedic films), the compositional curriculum being taught at the Conservatoire at the time did not appeal to her. She saw what composition students were obliged to compose and knew that style would not suite her – she wanted to retain her own compositional voice and identity. She did begin a harmony class with Maurice Duruflé, a well-known, prominent composer, whose relatively conservative approach, grounded in plainchant and

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13 Technique of my musical language.
14 The curriculum for basic musicianship at the Paris Conservatoire.
modality, should have been more congenial to Aboulker than Messian’s more radical interests. Unfortunately, students were not allowed to use the piano to complete their exercises, and Aboulker found this to be impossible. According to Duruflé, everything she did was wrong. After struggling for a time to figure out the harmonies without a piano, Aboulker left the class, deciding this style of learning was not for her.

Increased musical knowledge was not all Aboulker found at the Conservatoire. In her solfège class she met and fell in love with a young concert pianist, Edmond Rosenfeld. Although the two wanted to be married right away, her governess (and legal guardian) made Aboulker wait until age twenty-one, the legal age of marriage consent in France at the time; and so they did. Soon after they were married she was pregnant with the first of their two children.

**Early Career**

After she received her diploma in solfège (a three-year program) she found employment writing music for short films, theater, cabaret, and advertising materials. Although she wanted to compose music for full-length films, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a woman to break into the tight circle of French movie composers of the 1950s and 1960s. All films had traditionally been scored by men, and Aboulker was never given the opportunity to fulfill that dream. Instead she spent a year collaborating with a singer composing for a cabaret act (*musique variété*¹⁵), a frivolous and non-serious compositional art form.

When Aboulker was twenty-four, concert pianist Christian Ivaldi (a student of her uncle, Jacques Février) encouraged her to enroll in the *classe d’accompagnement au piano*¹⁶ at the Paris

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¹⁵ Encompassing term to describe entertainment music from a wide variety of genres for television, radio, and music halls for the general public.

¹⁶ Piano accompaniment class.
Conservatoire. He knew she was writing for the cabaret and encouraged her to do something more challenging. The *classe d’accompagnement au piano*, previously the class of famed composer Nadia Boulanger, was now taught by Henriette Puig-Roget. Puig-Roget’s rigorous curriculum required on-the-spot transposition, orchestral and piano score reading, and sight-reading, among other requirements. The rapid pace of the class and Aboulker’s particular love and talent for sight-reading meant she had found the perfect class for her. Furthermore, Puig-Roget understood that Aboulker was not like most of the other students. While the other students in the class were also around age twenty-four, this was Aboulker’s first year in the class; most of the other students had been enrolled in the course before. For once, her passion and hard work paid off—at the end of the year she received the accompaniment class’s first prize, *le prix d’accompagnement*.

Within a year of completing the *classe d’accompagnement au piano*, she had her first job as a dance class accompanist. Not long after, she was able to secure a position as an accompanist for the singer’s class at the Paris Conservatoire. Aboulker held this position for a decade and these years proved to be extremely important to her compositional career. During this time she experienced some of the most prestigious singers, voice teachers, and coaches of her generation (Janine Michau and Alain Lombard among others), working with vocal students. Accompanying many talented young singers, Aboulker played arias of great composers such as Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Massenet and Wagner, all while being privy to top-notch vocal instruction and musical interpretation. The teachers helped the students to gain deeper knowledge of the character and text, how to realize and interpret the composers’ intent, and how to synthesize that wealth of

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17 American students would know this as a performance class or a weekly masterclass. Students work on interpretation and performance of their repertoire.
knowledge to propel their singing to the highest level of performance. By playing great scores and listening to great teachers work with singers, Aboulker gained an invaluable compositional education, understanding what it was like to approach vocal music from a singer’s perspective. Because of this class, Aboulker began to truly understand what made a musical line well suited for the voice.

In 1972, Aboulker’s husband was hired as the conductor of a chamber society in the town of Amiens, eighty miles north of Paris. Though Aboulker continued to accompany in Amiens, she found herself increasingly frustrated by bad vocal instruction. Accompanying the singers of talented teachers remained fulfilling but listening to sub-par teachers work with students was increasingly unsatisfying. Thus, at the age of forty, Aboulker decided to return to the Paris Conservatoire to become a professeur d’accompagnement. After graduating she held the position of professeur d’accompagnement for several years at the University in Amiens until an exciting opportunity presented itself. In 1983, a friend at the Paris Conservatoire asked Aboulker to cover her class during her maternity leave. Happy to teach at her alma mater, Aboulker travelled back and forth between Paris and Amiens to teach the two classes. That year proved fruitful for Aboulker because she applied for and won the newly opened position of professor of solfège chanteur. Excited by this new prospect she and her husband moved back to Paris in 1984. Never one to seek the spotlight, Aboulker was extremely humbled to have a position among the multi-prize-winning faculty at the Paris Conservatoire. Aboulker remained in this position for the next twenty years. She retired from the Paris Conservatoire in 2004, enabling her to spend more time composing and with her family.

18 Professor of accompaniment.
19 Solfège for singers.
Pierre Boulez and IRCAM

The compositional climate prevailing in France during much of Aboulker’s career was not encouraging for her relatively traditional musical concerns. Apart from Messiaen, Pierre Boulez (1925-2016) is perhaps the most influential and dominant French composer of the second half of the twentieth century. With Boulez the serialism of the Second Viennese School came to a French fruition. Boulez, banned from hearing a great many famous twelve-tone works due to censorship laws imposed by the Germans in occupied Paris, did not hear many of the works that would shape him until after the war. In 1945, his first hearing of twelve-tone music was Schoenberg’s *Wind Quintet (op. 26)*; this led him to seek out the tutelage of René Leibowitz, who was extremely influential in introducing the music of the Second Viennese School to the French public after the war. Boulez was anxious to study the twelve-tone technique more completely and thus develop his own interpretation of serialism. Paul Griffiths sums up Boulez’s compositional style when he says:

> with rare exceptions (notably in the Third Piano Sonata), Boulez’s music displays its firmest foundations in linear, melodic thinking. In adopting and imaginatively developing the principles of Schoenbergian serialism in his organization of pitches, Boulez rapidly evolved a melodic manner of wide-ranging flexibility. The freedom with which he uses every possible tempered melodic interval is restrained only by a recurrent tendency of these intervals to fall into ‘characteristic’ aggregations, somewhat in the manner of Webern.  

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20 While Leibowitz claims to have met Schoenberg and to have studied with Webern in the 1930s, these claims have never been substantiated. Sabine Meine, “Leibowitz, René,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed 6 Jan. 2020, https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000016331.

In his later years, Boulez did broaden his thinking. He began to produce a more improvisatory melodic style rather than adhering to strict serialism.

One of Boulez’s most enduring impacts on modern French music was the establishment of the concert society *Domaine Musical*, and the research center *Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM)*. In 1954, with the patronage of Suzanne Tezenas, Boulez was able to gather musicians together to perform the repertory of the Second Viennese School and the new works of the avant-garde in Paris. He called this consortium the *Domaine Musical*. Lasting for twenty concert seasons, no organization of the time was more influential in bringing the works of contemporary composers to the public. Its impact was so broad that in 1970, President George Pompidou invited Boulez to create a music research center; thus IRCAM was established. This revolutionary collaboration of acoustic and musical research used rapidly progressing computer technologies to help integrate technological and instrumental forces.

For Aboulker, it was understandable that, measured against the serialist fervor of the 1970s and 80s, she found it difficult to have her music played early on in her compositional career. While the fact that she was a woman was doubtless a complicating factor, the primary obstacle was that she wrote tonal and primarily vocal music.

At one point in the height of IRCAM’s influence, the director at Radio France Culture, an admirer of her music, commissioned her to write an operetta. After she had composed *La Lacune*, she received word her piece had to be approved by the director of Radio France Musique before the commission could be fulfilled. When she showed him her work, he boldly declared

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22 Institute for Research and Coordination of Acoustics/Music.
24 France has seven national networks under Radio France: *France Musique, France Culture, France Inter, France Info, France Bleu, FIP*, and *MOV*. 

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her music was not good for the *politique* of the house of Radio France. Because her aesthetic was not that of Pierre Boulez and his associates of IRCAM, it seemed she was doomed to obscurity. But Aboulker’s sense of herself remained strong, and she was able to remain true to her own voice. The musical culture in France today is not dominated by IRCAM to the extent that it was forty years ago, and Aboulker’s music is now played throughout France. Her music for children is extremely popular, and, ironically, the children of many of the composers who snubbed Aboulker’s music for being too tonal grew up singing her songs.

**Aboulker’s Vocal Compositions**

When Aboulker was about twelve years old, she first experienced accompanying an operatic aria. While accompanying Charles Gounod’s *Faites-lui mes aveux* from *Faust*, she was overwhelmed with the beauty created when a vocal melodic line and harmonies combine. Thus, it is no surprise that the crux of Isabelle Aboulker’s work lies in the realm of vocal music. Aboulker has an extraordinary gift for vocal composition, particularly for the young singer. During her years at the Paris Conservatoire, Aboulker learned wholly the capabilities of the human voice and thus how to write for it.

While a professor at the Conservatoire, Aboulker was still an active composer. Her numerous works for adults and children include songs, choruses, opera, an oratorio, and many *contes musicaux*.25 From the melodic and harmonic influences of the great French composers of the nineteenth century, she learned how to marry music and text, the clear goal of all her work. Aboulker has always been particularly selective about texts, preferring the succinct texts where not a word is wasted. Her knowledge and understanding of good French literature drew her to the

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25 A genre combining fanciful tales with music, primarily for children.
writings of Jean de la Fontaine and Jules Renard for their concentrated and succinct styles, but she was also drawn to many writers (particularly Jean de la Fontaine) because their writing lent itself to children.

Much of Aboulker’s work is composed for children, and her reputation throughout France is primarily as a composer for young people, although she has produced a substantial output of music for the adult singer as well. Her light-hearted musical attitude makes her particularly adept at composing for children, and she believes that she is meant to do so. Aboulker holds a deep respect for young people, seeing in them a future promise of better things to come.

And yet much of her music, particularly that which is not composed for children, is challenging enough to appeal to those who are more advanced, even while it is accessible to the younger singer as well. In fact, Aboulker has spent several weeks each summer between 2009 and 2016 working with American singers at the Franco-American Vocal Academy (now the William Lewis School of Opera). During her residency at the program she gave masterclasses and coachings to the students, working with them on pieces by composers such as Debussy, Poulenc, and Gounod, in addition to her own work. Her work with the young singers focused on developing the voice through the textual meaning, helping them evoke the inherent joy of singing, two things her music does beautifully.26

The ability to write well for the voice is a skill that many composers do not possess. But Aboulker’s lyrical melodic lines reflect the meaning of the text in a way that makes it easy for the singer to sing and for the listener to understand. Her music is primarily tonal, but she often uses intense chromaticism when she believes the text calls for it.

26 I had the opportunity to observe Aboulker coaching many American students.
Pedagogical Publications

Aboulker’s love and understanding of the voice, innate musical talent, varied musical background, and unabashed preference for nineteenth-century French music made her an excellent professor of solfège for singers. In addition, her compositions for radio, film, television, and the cabaret, as well as her classical compositions brought a unique perspective to her students. Unlike the other solfège teachers at the Paris Conservatoire, Aboulker believed students should learn rhythm and intervals first using their native language before moving on to German, Italian, and English. By internalizing these concepts using their native tongue, Aboulker believed music would come more naturally to the singer. To that end she wrote two musicianship manuals for singers, which were published in 2000 and 2001.²⁷

The first book La voix et le rythme: 1. étude du rythme, 2. prosodies rythmiques²⁸ teaches singers rhythm. The first section begins teaching the basic concepts of note durations and, using simple and compound meter, progresses through more complicated rhythms. Exercises not only use neutral syllables such as “ta” but frequently use works by different authors from the past several hundred years including Jean de la Fontaine, Victor Hugo, Charles Baudelaire, and Apollinaire. In this book, Aboulker uses the natural cadence of the French language to teach the various rhythmic concepts which can be seen in the following example from the La voix et le rythme:

²⁸ Voice and rhythm: 1. study of rhythm, 2. rhythmic prosody (the patterns of rhythm and sound used in poetry; the patterns of stress and intonation in a language).
Exercise number 12 teaches the student about whole, half, and quarter rests using text by Jean de la Fontaine.

In this simple exercise stressed syllables are given notes with longer duration. Aboulker also places rests where one would inevitably pause for comedic effect: “It is good to be charitable…but to whom?...That’s the point.” In the second section, Aboulker helps the singer apply the rhythmic principles learned in the first section to more complicated prose. She then moves through three hundred years of musical style in 20 exercises. The first exercise instructs the singer to perform text of Paroles de Montausier (1610-1690) in the style of Jean-Philippe Rameau. In subsequent exercises, she moves the singer through the styles of Gluck, Massenet, Offenbach, Ravel, Fauré, Debussy, and finally into contemporary rhythm, including jazz. She also includes an introduction to contemporary notation.
Example 2.2 Exercise number eight uses ancient Chinese text to be spoken in the style of Ravel

Aboulker’s second book *Les intervalles: 1.melodies et intervalles, 2.textes et intervalles*\(^2\) is also divided into two sections. In the first, Aboulker teaches intervals through accompanied melodies she has composed using texts by various authors. There are three levels of difficulty for each interval, beginning with the second and continuing to the seventh, incorporating the major, minor, diminished and augmented variations of each. This allows the singer to move progressively from easier exercises to those that are more difficult. The accompaniment for each exercise helps the singer center on the tonic pitch.

\(^2\) Intervals: 1.melodies and intervals, 2.texts and intervals.
Example 2.3 Accompanied difficult exercise for thirds

The second section increases in difficulty as the singer must sing the correct notes without the help of accompaniment. By taking away the aid of piano accompaniment, the exposed singer must prove they know each interval. The format is similar to the first section, but instead of increasing in difficulty for each exercise, Aboulker writes a melody on texts in French, English, Italian, and German for each interval.
Aboulker’s pedagogical books highlight her belief in the deep connection between text, music, and the voice. It also showcases her understanding of how text setting can assist in good vocal production.

**Conclusion**

Aboulker’s music has continued to grow in popularity, particularly over the past two decades. She has received commissions from Jean-Claude Malgoire for the l’Atelier Lyrique de Tourcoing, Symphonies d’Automne, l’Académie Musicale de Villecroze, the Quatuor Debussy and l’Opéra de Lyon. She has won numerous prizes including the Prix de l’Académie Beaux-Arts (1999), the Prix Musique from the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatique in 2000 and the Prix Maurice-Yvain from the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatique in 2010. In
2016 she was awarded the prize for music education from the *Chambre syndicale des Editeurs de Musique de France* for her work *Myla et L'Arbre-bateau*.

Still, Aboulker remains incredibly humble, not considering herself to be a great composer of *musique pure* or *musique sérieuse* because she does not comfortably compose in all genres, particularly instrumental. Her intense focus on prosody and her demanding choices of libretti carry on the great tradition of French *mélodie*, just like Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc. Yet Aboulker sees herself simply as a musician and *mélodiste* because she loves writing for the voice. And while she is an excellent composer, it is not at the core of her identity. She believes music is a gift that is most beautiful when it is exactly suited to an individual. Her family holds the central place in her life, and spending time with her husband, children and grandchildren is always her top priority. As a woman without ego, she is a rarity in the compositional world, but she has made and is still making a great impact on French music today.
Chapter Three

A Key to Understanding What Makes “Good” Vocal Writing

In order to argue that Aboulker’s songs are well suited for the voice, we must first understand what constitutes a “good” vocal composition. We will then be able to determine what makes it well suited for the younger singer. It must be said that to state definitively what makes a particular composition well suited for the voice would take an entire book and even then there would be dispute. This question seems as variable and subjective as what makes a “good” singer. One can say that a singer with solid technique, or a pretty voice, etc., would be considered a “good” singer, but the qualities that give them that distinction constitute more than just technique or even beauty of sound. There is an indescribable essence to most “good” singers that, when successfully communicated, brings the audience more intimately into the musical work and increases enjoyment of the performance. Singers with perfect technique who are missing this essentially un-learnable quality are frequently less desirable than a singer with imperfect technique that evokes this je ne sais quoi when performing. These outstanding singers give of themselves completely to a piece of music, and thus to the audience.\(^{30}\) While these mystical and mysterious aspects of what makes a “good” singer may be inexplicable, there are tangible components to “good” singing that can we can objectively use to argue why Aboulker’s music is well composed for the voice. I will consider a number of these concrete factors that will not only take into account basic melodic and harmonic choices, but also vocal and technical

\(^{30}\) Maria Callas is the most famous example of a great singer with an imperfect voice. While she was lauded for her on-stage performances, it is generally agreed upon that her voice was not traditionally beautiful. But she could command the attention of the audience and was, by all accounts, mesmerizing to watch.
considerations, as well as text setting. I will utilize commonly held knowledge about the voice that is generally accepted by current vocal teachers, as well as consider the other various elements of vocal technique and musicianship (particularly in regards to contemporary music) as written about and exemplified by composers, singers, and vocal pedagogues. This section will not try to answer the question of what constitutes “good” vocal writing in a philosophical, emotional, or existential sense, but will focus on the more tangible aspects of a piece that make it most conducive for the voice, specifically for the beginning classical singer.

This study will draw on the vocal tradition and pedagogy of the past two hundred years that have shaped classical music in Europe and the United States. The writings of vocal pedagogues such as Barbara Doscher, Richard Miller, and Manuel Garcia have been influential in discerning what aspects of music make a piece well-written for the voice. Doscher’s book *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice* has been useful when understanding vocal mechanics, particularly how those mechanics differ from the younger singer to the professional. Doscher, a voice teacher for all levels, fully understood that the “singing voice is considered a young instrument from the time it changes during puberty to the age of 25. Muscular maturation continues during those years.” While noted pedagogues contribute greatly to this study, it is also important to consider the perspective of the composer. Paul Barker’s book *Composing for Voice: A Guide for Composers, Singers, and Teachers* helps illustrate the compositional techniques that will help identify what specifically makes a piece well composed for the voice. This means that not only do we need to understand what a singer must focus on personally, but what a composer should consider when writing a piece for the voice. This is why Barker, a

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composer, conductor, and lecturer, directs his book not only to the composer but to the singer as well. This direction requires taking the reader through the composer’s necessary perspective on the workings of the voice, considering the collaboration between voice, text, and music, and placing emphasis on the composer’s understanding of the singer as actor. His thoughtful examination of these basic elements of vocal writing is extremely helpful for our analysis of Isabelle Aboulker’s music as an exemplary way for teachers to introduce their students to contemporary French music.

The Voice

The voice, unique to each person and innately unpredictable, contains an abundance of intense vulnerability. The voice’s ability to express not only pitch but also text sets it apart from all other instruments. Thus, for hundreds of years, the voice has been used as a vehicle for the highest levels of emotional expression. It is the instrument for which music began, and that which all other instruments have historically attempted to emulate. Even Charles Darwin wrote of the enigma of the voice in 1871:

[The voice] is generally admitted to be the basis or origin of instrumental music. As neither the enjoyment nor the capacity of producing musical notes are faculties of the least direct use to man in reference to [his] ordinary habits of life, they must be ranked amongst the most mysterious with which he is endowed. \(^\text{32}\)

Even with the advent of vocal science in the mid-1800s through Manuel Garcia II, the father of modern vocal pedagogy, the voice as an instrument has retained much of its mystery. \(^\text{33}\) In an


address given at the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) conference in 1976, Dominick Argento sums up the importance of the voice to musical evolution:

Of all instruments for the production of music, the voice, in my opinion, takes pride of place: it is the original instrument, the one for which and with which music was invented. All other instruments – with the possible exception of the percussion family\(^{34}\) – are essentially imitations of the voice with enhanced characteristics: they can go higher or lower than the voice, they can make a louder or longer sound, they can produce several pitches at the same time. And while some of these attributes may be improvements over the original, the voice still remains inimitable in one very important respect.\(^{35}\)

That most important respect, Argento continues, is that a singer, unlike an instrument and instrumentalist, is inseparable from their voice, thus making the voice the most intimate and vulnerable of all instruments.

These unique qualities of the voice are most exquisitely on display when the singer has complete control of every technical aspect of their instrument. Combining the refinement of technical mastery with uninhibited sound creates a musical experience unlike any other. Herein lies the job of the voice teacher. The internalization of this simultaneous push and pull is best accomplished through a thorough study of general vocal technique and a singer’s individual instrument within the context of voice lessons.

Before moving on to the technical aspects of vocal study, it is important to note that the vocal objectives discussed in this chapter are unique to classical vocal students in North America and Europe. There are differing expectations for beautiful singing across all cultures of the world, and not every culture values the same sounds. Even within the United States and Europe,

\(^{34}\) While the percussion family may be the exception, the talking drum (or ghan ghan) from West Africa is an example of a percussion instrument that seeks to emulate the voice.

jazz, blues, pop, and even musical theater all favor a slightly different vocal style. Probably the most different vocal style to that of the traditional classical school in North America and Europe is the yodel. It is a unique and sought after style of singing that exploits the “break” in a singer’s voice as it moves quickly between the vocal registers. Yodeling is famously popular in Alpine cultures, as well as in early American country music. Another very different style of vocal production is throat-singing or overtone-singing. This highly skilled vocal technique allows the performer to create two or three simultaneous vocal lines. This unique style is most popular in Mongolia and the Republic of Tuva and, is also found in neighboring countries. Yodeling and throat-singing are two extremely diverse vocal techniques that illustrate that varied vocal styles that can be found throughout the world.

Traditionally, the goal of voice lessons in the United States and Europe is to train the voice to produce an even sound throughout the registers, extend range, develop breath control, and increase stamina, all without causing stress on the vocal folds. In his 1894 book *Hints on Singing*, Manuel Garcia II states that the object of vocal study is “to make the voice irreproachable in its intonation, firm, strong, flexible, extended, and to correct its faults.” He posits that a teacher is “to teach the student the art of phrasing, to familiarize him with the different styles, and to develop his expression.”

Making the voice “irreproachable” and “correcting its faults” is an involved process requiring intense coordination of external and internal parts of the body. The external aspects such as good posture, appropriate mouth opening, and proper tongue placement can be demonstrated physically by the teacher. But there are a host of internal, unseen mechanisms the

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voice teacher must train the young singer to sense, which is one of the most difficult aspects of vocal training.

In order to produce an optimal sound, the body must coordinate the breath and vocal cords to create the “dynamic muscle equilibrium,” a term coined by Bertram Briess in 1964, more commonly known as a balanced onset. When a singer is able to coordinate their body to produce that balanced onset, the focus can then turn to sustaining the breath as a means of controlling the produced sound. Without support from the breath, the sound cannot be sustained and will falter. This forces the singer to turn to other means to sustain the sound such as tightening their throat, jaw, or tongue or pushing out the sound by contracting all the abdominal muscles, not just those needed to support the sound. While these problems are common among young singers, with time, study, and practice, a student can learn to create a balanced onset that is sustained by proper breath control.

In addition, even while the student is focusing on that external and internal coordination to produce the optimal sound, they must also sing correct notes in correct rhythms, have accurate diction, and convey the meaning of the text and intent of the composer in a meaningful way to those listening. Young singers need a good portion of their brain power focused on proper technique, thus making it advisable that a student in the early stages of vocal development not be asked to tackle pieces that could draw too much attention away from their vocal technique, all while still appropriately challenging them musically. Because of this, assigning music (particularly contemporary music) for the young singer presents a unique challenge.

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Composing for the Voice

The question of what makes any piece of music well-composed for the voice is one that is not easily answered. There are a host of factors that contribute to making a composition appear well suited for the voice and, in addition, the question itself is subjective. What one singer, composer or teacher believes to be true may not be shared by others. In fact, even the most basic question of whether the composer should favor the music or the text, is an age old question that simply reflects a person’s particular interest and preference. While composers like Mozart and Wagner believed text should be obedient to music, other composers believed that the text reigned supreme. On this subject Arthur Honegger mused, “What is the true vocal style? For me it is the manner of considering the voice as a vehicle for words. It is, therefore, a special instrument, different from all others, which no other can ever replace.”38 He further argued that:

For me, the music of a song is always dependent upon the poetic model. It [the music] must join so closely with the poetry that they become inseparable and one can picture the poem in wholly musical terms. This is not to say that the music becomes subservient. It must be so crafted that it can stand on its own merits; playable without the text, logical and complete in form.39

As we will see, Honegger’s understanding of music and text closely links to Aboulker’s understanding. While the ideal hierarchy of text and music is something this paper will not attempt to answer, it is important to know that it is a debate that has lasted for centuries.

Determining whether a piece is well suited for the voice can also depend on its country of origin. As each country has a particular school of vocal music composition and vocal study, both influenced heavily by that country’s native tongue, nationalism often influences both singing

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Richard Miller analyzed the nationalistic school of singing in Europe in the 1970s in his book *English, French, German and Italian Techniques of Singing*. In it, he describes the differences in vocal technique and vocal teaching in each of the referenced European countries. In his 1997 follow-up book, *National Schools of Singing: English, French, German, and Italian Techniques of Singing Revisited*, Miller concludes that “there is a greater degree of universality in the teaching of singing than was the case in 1950.”

40 Although we will discuss the French style of vocal writing and singing in greater detail in a later chapter, it is important to note here that in the French tradition, music depends on the language more heavily than in other European countries; it has grown out of the language, attempting not to obscure the text.

Composing for the voice is difficult no matter what language the composer is setting; even some of the most famous composers in history have struggled to compose satisfactory vocal music. Music historians acknowledge some of the greatest vocal composers to be Mozart, Puccini, Richard Strauss, Fauré, and Schubert (to name a few), yet do not recognize the great Beethoven and Haydn necessarily to be among their ranks. While Beethoven and Haydn were extremely prolific in their instrumental writing, their vocal music does not meet the high standards of the other composers listed. Music critics have thought that Beethoven lacked sympathy for the human voice, 41 that “there was one department of the art in which Beethoven did not shine with the same lustre, that of song writing. ”

42 This is not to negate these composers’

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contributions to the musical canon; but, you will not find as many art songs or vocal works by
Beethoven or Haydn assigned in university vocal studios as those by Schubert or Fauré. No
matter a composer’s level of genius, not every composer can be said to compose well for the
voice.

In addition, though composing has been made easier through technology, composing for
the voice remains challenging, even as music composition has changed over the past century.
While classical composers would sit with pen and paper (perhaps playing some of the music
themselves on a piano or other instrument), composers can now sit alone at a computer and hear
all the parts of their composition played back immediately. While classical composers waited at
length to hear their entire score played by a large ensemble, modern-day composers are able to
hear their compositions played for them in perfect intonation and rhythm even while they
compose. Thus these modern composers oftentimes neglect to consider whether what they have
written is even possible for any given instrument to play, or even more commonly, for the voice
to sing.\textsuperscript{43} In contrast, Mozart, among others, composed many of his greatest works with
particular singers in mind. His operas, in fact, were not composed until the singers were cast (a
practice not uncommon during this time), thus allowing his intimate knowledge of the voices for
which he was writing to influence his compositions. Classical composers throughout the
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in fact, made a point to understand the voice through
observation and practice, thus allowing for more singer autonomy than today. This emphasis on
understanding the voice and vocal composition has dramatically decreased since the music of
Giuseppe Verdi, one of the leading composers of Italian opera in the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{43} I have played and sung many pieces where it was evident that the composer sat at the
computer and played with sounds without taking into consideration what a live performer could
reasonably accomplish with the piece.
Unfortunately, even today, the class requirements for composition degrees at many universities do not contain a specific class on vocal composition. Paul Barker in his book *Composing for Voice* sums up the current state of affairs:

> Despite the emphasis on the voice in today’s music, the proportion of time students spend dealing with vocal matters has perhaps never been less…Few serious music students or composers I have encountered in any country have ever been given even an option to study how to write for the voice as a part of a music degree. Orchestration and music technology are “de rigeur,” but the voice is largely left in the dark and singers are sequestered safely into their own department away from any risk of contamination with instrumentalists, let alone composers. This system implies to young composers that the voice is not worthy of serious curriculum study.  

As Mozart demonstrated, a composer best learns to write for the voice by working directly with singers and by observing their technique and skill level. In the same vein, Barker reminds us that the great vocal composers of the past learned about the voice, not by reading about it, but by interacting frequently with singers and studying great vocal scores.

While subjectivity, hierarchy of text and music, nationalism, and contemporary techniques may all influence vocal writing to varying degrees, there are key factors we can objectively identify that contribute to a beautifully composed piece of music that is well suited for the voice. These factors involve not only focus on pedagogical issues, but also examine the musicality of the vocal line and setting of the text. In the following section I will examine some of these factors and use them as tools to help determine whether Aboulker’s music is a good and appropriate choice of contemporary music for voice teachers to assign to their students.

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Choosing Repertoire for the Young Voice

“Good” vocal writing, pedagogically and musically, consists of many conventional compositional techniques that are key to understanding what makes a piece an appropriate choice for the young singer. When analyzing a vocal line and reflecting on its difficulty and suitability for a singer, a teacher should consider these standards when choosing repertoire. Although it is extremely challenging to codify what aspects of a piece make it well suited for the voice, it is by no means impossible. An experienced teacher can readily determine whether a piece is appropriate for a singer and why. Inexperienced singers often ask to sing (or in my experience insist on singing) something that is “too big” or “too light” for their voice which could lead to vocal fatigue and potential harm to the vocal folds. The diligent teacher knows not every singer can sing any song and thus matches works appropriately to the ability of the singer. Ideally, a young singer should be able to sing for a lesson, a practice session, a rehearsal, and, eventually, an entire opera without experiencing vocal fatigue. John Nix describes the importance of appropriate repertoire in the opening of Barbara Doscher’s book *From Studio to Stage: Repertoire for the Voice* when he says:

Few singers can overcome the difficulties caused by repertoire which is not suited for their voice. By the same logic, it follows that no matter how talented and knowledgeable the teacher is in assisting the singer to establish a secure technical foundation, the same teacher can hamper the student’s rate of development or even tear down the technique they helped the student acquire by assigning inappropriate literature. Secure technique, good health habits, AND singing the proper repertoire are the keys to a long, successful career as a singer. It is the teacher’s task to carefully choose repertoire which insures success and progress while it challenges but does not defeat the student.\(^{45}\)

In an effort to prove why the music of Isabelle Aboulker is appropriate for a young singer, I will attempt to codify musical aspects of a piece that make it well suited for the voice. I will then use

those codified aspects to create a rubric with which I can analyze her music. In order to create this rubric, we must consider and elaborate on each of the following compositional vocal attributes and consider their importance to the singer: range, tessitura, phrase lengths, ascending and descending lines, legato, staccato, leaps, text/melodic setting, and harmonic setting.\(^{46}\)

**Range and tessitura**, although distinct vocal concepts, are both extremely important for a voice teacher to consider when assigning a piece. Range consists of how high and low a singer can physically sing, while tessitura delineates where the singer’s voice “sits” most comfortably. Doscher sums these up when she writes that “range is the extent of a voice, the upper and lower limits of frequency. Within that range, there is a certain compass in which the voice performs with special ease of production and sound. That compass of notes is called the tessitura.”\(^{47}\)

Although a teacher must make sure that both the range and tessitura are appropriate for a student’s current abilities and voice type, the tessitura carries more weight than the range, especially for a young singer. Finding a piece with appropriate range is not challenging. For example, a piece may primarily sit between E4 and E5 but extend down briefly to G3 or up to G5. If the singer cannot sing one of those notes, then the piece is not an appropriate choice. Regarding tessitura, it should not be so large that it becomes uncomfortable for either a high or low voice to sing comfortably, making it impossible to focus on technical issues. The subcategories of the *Fach* system are primarily what we use to easily understand the tessituras for the main voice types: soprano, mezzo-soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{46}\) Part of this list is taken from Paul Barker’s *Composing for Voice.*

\(^{47}\) Doscher, *Functional Unity of Singing,* 196.

\(^{48}\) The *Fach* system is a systematic method for voice categories. Developed in Germany, the *Fach* system breaks down the main voice categories into smaller subdivisions.
prevalent in musical theater where singers are expected to list their range on their resume. The piece can, and should, extend beyond the tessitura, but the voice teacher must keep the general range and tessitura of each student in mind when selecting repertoire.

**Phrase length** is also an important consideration for a voice teacher. As previously established, a singer works to develop their breath support over the course of their vocal study. Doscher states that the “single most important trait of the young voice is its limited endurance.” A young singer’s breath support is not as developed as that of an advanced singer, and thus cannot support a long phrase with the same emotional gravitas as a more seasoned vocalist. Thus the phrases need to be reasonable in length and, if longer, contain logical places to breathe. Furthermore, the phrase must encourage the singer to use their breath to support the sound and move through the phrase. Phrases that are too long often result in a young singer holding in their breath, wrongly thinking that “reserving breath” will help them through to the end of the phrase. Since breathing is as much about timing as it is about capacity, whether you breathe in and hold the air or slowly expel it, you will still need to breathe in again after a certain amount of time. Thus it behooves the singer to use the breath instead of holding it in, an idea that can be helped along with proper vocal phrasing.

The composer’s use of **ascending and descending passages** is another key component to consider when assigning music. At the beginning of a student’s vocal study, the general consensus is to work from the “top down,” especially for women. The descent of the vocal line also helps the young singer to blend the registers and achieve an even tone top to bottom. A descending five-note scale from sol to do that gradually moves higher by half steps is one of the most common vocal exercises. This allows the singer to feel the soft palate lift and then use their

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breath to keep the soft palate lifted as the note descends. As it is easier to keep the soft palate lifted when the notes are descending than ascending, this exercise allows the singer to bring that space created to sing a higher note down to the lower note. A singer will often sing the same five notes differently ascending than when descending, so paying attention to the direction of the vocal line when choosing repertoire is important. We will pay close attention to the direction of the vocal line when we take a closer look at Aboulker’s pieces.

Another important consideration is legato. Legato helps the singer to stay connected to their breath and tone and teaches the singer how to have a smooth, even sound throughout the registers. The use of the legato line, according to Barker, was “derived from Gregorian chant, through Palestrina, perfected by the Bel Canto school and through Puccini into Frank Sinatra.”

It is through legato that the voice can most beautifully convey the emotion of the text, which is primarily achieved by use of the vowel. An ideal piece for a young singer would be one where the legato, by use of the vowel, is used to portray emotion so that the singer can keep the voice connected to the breath. Although good composers vary the articulation, a teacher should pay close attention to the singer’s ability to keep their breath connected to their sound while performing a piece of music.

Leaps are a hallmark of a beautiful vocal line and, when used well, can be an excellent vocal tool. Mozart found leaps ideal for their intense dramatic capabilities, and composers quickly (and continuously) followed suit. But extreme leaps, particularly those that pass through several registers and may cause the singer to disconnect from the melodic line, should be carefully analyzed before assigning a piece to a young singer. In fact, basic leaps can create problems if they are arbitrary, thus denying the singer a harmonic or dramatic foundation. Yet

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leaps can be sung without disconnecting the sound, with clearly articulated text and heightened drama. Barker uses Fiordiligi’s aria, “Come Scoglio,” from Mozart’s opera *Cosi fan Tutte* as an example. To summarize, the leaps included in this aria provide drama without losing connectivity to the melodic line because the “underlying harmony and phrasing gives a sense of direction.” Barker warns that leaps requiring too dramatic of a shift in registers often do not convey the drama and make the text incoherent. It is important that the composer treat leaps with intention and consideration of the range, tessitura, and dramatic and harmonic context, and that voice teachers consider closely any piece with significant leaps.

Of all these factors, **text/melodic setting** may be the most important. As discussed earlier, text sets the voice apart from all other instruments. The singer is the “vehicle for the realization of the marriage between text and music,” and must be able to fully realize the piece; thus, text choices are of utmost importance. All of the previous factors could be well-executed, but if the text setting is unclear or choppy, the piece will simply not be as successful. Purcell said of music and text that:

> Music and poetry have been acknowledged sisters, which walking hand in hand support each other; as poetry is the harmony of words, so music is that of notes: and as poetry is a rise above prose and oratory, so music is the exaltation of poetry. Both of them may excel apart, but surely they are most excellent when they are joined, because nothing is then wanting to either of their proportions; for thus they appear like wit and beauty in the same person.

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52 I recently attended the New York City Opera’s production of *Dolores Claiborne* by Tobias Picker, and was extremely disappointed with the vocal line and text settings. The text was unintelligible and the melody unappealing (although there were some beautiful harmonic moments). The text was unclear due to the extreme leaps and inappropriate tessitura for the mezzo-soprano.
53 Barker, *Composing for Voice*, 44.
54 Henry Purcell, *Vocal and Instrumental of the Prophetess or the History of Dioclesian* (London: J. Heptinstall, 1691), 2.
While historically most composers have chosen to set poetry, a popular choice for composers in the last century, and particularly for Isabelle Aboulker, is the setting of prose. Prose provides an inherent challenge to the composer for, unlike poetry, it is not organized in stanzas, or phrases, or, as is often the case with poetry, with a rhyme scheme. However, the setting of prose can be just as beautiful in the hands of a skilled composer. Assuming that linguistic comprehension and unity of music and language is the compositional goal, as it has been historically, the composer has a number of techniques they can use to achieve that goal, whether writing for poetry or prose.

When a voice teacher is choosing a piece, their first consideration should be how the composer set the language. If they did not adhere to the natural cadence, rhythm, and melodic structure of the language, the comprehension will be severely compromised. The voice teacher should look for important words or syllables to be on accented beats or phrase peaks, in addition to the use of melismas, dynamic contrasts, or rhythmic contrasts that enhance language comprehension. In this vein, if possible, repertoire should be chosen that is in the original language. If an unimportant word in the translated language such as “the” or “a” end up falling on a note meant for an important word or syllable, thus accenting the article and covering up the noun or verb, the piece will be increasingly difficult to understand (this explains why songs sung in translation are not always as satisfying as those sung in the original language).

When considering appropriate text setting for young singers, voice teachers must remember that, as we have discussed, the vowel is the “vehicle for emotional expression.” This is because, to make an obvious point, only the vowel can be sung. The majority of consonants

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55 Barker, Composing for Voice, 54.
56 Barker, Composing for Voice, 21.
are unvoiced, thus when overused or used badly the singing, in essence, stops. If the singer dwells on those consonants it detracts from the vowel making the word incomprehensible. The voice teacher must pay attention to which types of vowels (open or closed) are used on each note and to the amount of time given for the vowel to ring before moving on to the next sound. And, the voice teacher must also consider whether the melody does justice to, and enhances, the drama of the text. Through vowel differentiation, clear consonants, and breath support the audience can most clearly understand the text and thus experience the full drama of the piece.

Lastly, a good voice teacher not only considers the melodic writing of a piece, but also the harmonic setting. Admittedly, while the melody holds greater weight in determining a piece’s suitability, the harmony is also an important consideration. Before Arnold Schoenberg developed the 12-tone system, music primarily lived in the tonal sphere and was generally predictable. Although an oversimplification, it cannot be denied that learning Schoenberg’s post-tonal work, *Pierrot Lunaire*, is a very different task than learning one of Gabriel Fauré’s many *mélodies*. Benjamin Britten’s setting of folk songs exemplifies how complex harmony can turn an easy melody into a difficult piece. Although Britten’s folksongs introduce students to those more complex harmonies, they should be assigned with discretion. Assigning particularly difficult harmonic pieces should only be done when students are technically secure.

Note must be made of the general reputation of contemporary composers and their use of “extended vocal techniques,” a broad term for the exploitation of the voice to create sounds outside the realm of traditional classical singing. Barker discusses the reticence of many voice

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57 Unvoiced consonants are those made by air passing through the articulators. This results in a breathy sound and does not create any vocal phonation.

58 John Cage, Luciano Berio, George Crumb, Arnold Schoenberg, and Cathy Berberian are a few composers who have used extended vocal techniques. Extended vocal techniques include inhaling, rapping, glottal sounds, yodeling, vocal tremolo, screaming, growling, etc.
teachers to assign works by contemporary composers due to their reputation for ruining a singer’s tone and legato; this reticence is not unfounded.\textsuperscript{59} While not every contemporary composition requires “extended vocal techniques,” many ask for extreme register changes and frequent glottal onsets, contain difficult harmonic settings and vocal lines that do not allow for a clear declamation of text. For many of these compositions, the voice is being used more for its variation of sound than for projection of clear text. But this technique can cause the young singer to tighten muscles and force sound, both of which can lead to vocal fatigue or injury as well as undermine the technical education of the young singer. Luckily for the composer, as the singer’s technique develops they are able to better control their voice and produce the sounds asked for without damaging their voice. Barkeroptimistically believes that the height of wild experimentation by use of extended vocal techniques is over, and composers use these techniques more conservatively. But the “myth of the dreaded modern music composer lives on in the minds and hearts of many teachers and singers today.”\textsuperscript{60} Some teachers do not permit any of their students to attempt more advanced contemporary pieces. Not every contemporary piece for the voice will threaten the vocal health of a singer, and voice teachers should be able to discern which singers have a strong enough technical foundation to use their voice in a healthy manner.

In order to succinctly analyze the four pieces of \textit{Femmes en Fables} I will use the following five criteria: range, tessitura, phrase length, text/melodic setting, and harmonic setting. Any discussion of ascending/descending lines, legato, and leaps will be discussed within those five categories. As I will discuss in Chapter Five, Aboulker’s music not only avoids extended

\textsuperscript{60} Barker, \textit{Composing for Voice}, 26.
vocal techniques, but in fact adheres to many of the previously discussed standards, thus making her music suitable, accessible, and appropriately challenging to the novice singer. Even singers not far enough advanced in their technical ability to deal with the demands of the extended vocal techniques some modern music employs should still be able to enjoy the novelty of contemporary vocal composition. Aboulker’s years of working directly with singers in an educational setting gives her a unique perspective on what singers are able to do at various levels of training. The great composers of the past learned the workings of the voice by direct interaction with singers, and that is exactly what Aboulker did for many years, as she sat accompanying aria classes, and listening to the great singers of the day work with young voices. Barker says that the composer needs to work to understand the voice – Aboulker’s experience working with and playing for singers gives her a unique perspective and appreciation for the voice that other composers would do well to emulate.
Chapter Four

Introduction to Femmes en Fables and Jean de la Fontaine

Aboulker has always found herself drawn more to prose than to poetry. For example, her hauntingly beautiful piece, Cher Pierre, uses Marie Currie’s letters to her husband Pierre, combining sung phrases with spoken passages. Similarly, the unadorned nature of La Fontaine’s poetry drew Aboulker to his fables. La Fontaine’s efficient use of language and down-to-earth philosophy and commentary on humankind create a concise narrative. In very few words, he sets the scene for each fable, allowing the reader to experience the story exactly as he does. While La Fontaine’s fables are not considered prose, their irregularity and natural cadence better suits them to Aboulker’s taste. According to scholar of French literature Leslie Sykes:

[The Fables] represent the quintessence of a century of experiments in prosody and poetic diction in France. The great majority of the Fables are composed of lines of varying metre and, from the unpredictable interplay of their rhymes and of their changing rhythms, La Fontaine derived the most exquisite and diverse effects of tone and movement. His vocabulary harmonizes widely different elements: the archaic, the precious and the burlesque, the refined, the familiar and the rustic, the language of professions and trades and the language of philosophy and mythology. But for all this richness, economy and understatement are the chief characteristics of his style, and its full appreciation calls for keener sensitivity to the overtones of 17th-century French than most foreign readers can hope to possess.61

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Jean de la Fontaine and His Fables

Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695) was born to a middle class family in Château-Thierry, a small town northeast of Paris in the province of Champagne. La Fontaine entered the Oratory in 1641 to study theology but left eighteen months later to return to Château-Thierry, where he enjoyed the comfortable life enjoyed by most members of the privileged seventeenth-century French middle class. At that time, the emerging middle class boasted of comfortable houses, plentiful food and wine, and ample entertainment. In 1645, La Fontaine traveled to Paris to study law in preparation to succeed his father as maître des eaux et forêts, returning to Château-Thierry in 1647 after passing his examinations.

La Fontaine did not officially move to Paris until 1661, but in the intervening years he made frequent trips to the great city. His time in Paris studying law made a profound impact on his life, as it connected him with men who shared his literary taste. He became a member of the literary academy, les Paladins, a new Round Table that met in the home of Paul Pellisson who later became the historiographer for Louis XIV.

At the insistence of his father, La Fontaine wed Marie Héricart on November 10, 1647. La Fontaine showed little interest in his new wife or what she did, but his wife was equally indifferent. Both engaged in extramarital affairs even while maintaining a friendly

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62 While La Fontaine never entered service to the Church, he did return to religion and became very pious in the final years of his life.
64 La Fontaine succeeded his father and grandfather in the office of maître des eaux et forêts (master of the waters and forests). The Royal post required the maître des eaux et forêts to visit the assigned bodies of water and forests twice a year and write a report for the king.
65 Mackay, *La Fontaine and His Friends*, 32.
companionship. Their only child, Charles, was born in 1653, and La Fontaine, after Charles’s infancy, had little to do with his son.

These years also saw the decline of La Fontaine’s father’s finances due to bureaucratic changes to his position. His father’s death in 1657 forced La Fontaine to assume his father’s debts, and in order to pay the debts and avoid ruin for himself and his wife, his marriage contract was annulled by mutual consent, allowing his wife’s property to be secured to her individually. With his father gone and his marriage annulled, La Fontaine no longer had much to keep him in Château-Thierry. In addition to his debts, La Fontaine also inherited his father’s position as maître des eaux et forêts, in which he was extremely uninterested. La Fontaine made the permanent move to Paris in 1661.

Upon his arrival in Paris, and under the patronage of Nicolas Fouquet (the Superintendent of Finance under King Louis XIV, with whom he had cultivated a friendship in the preceding years), the forty-year-old La Fontaine dedicated himself fully to writing. In Paris he kept company with many great French writers and composers such as Molière, Jean Racine, and Jean-Baptiste Lully, as well as their patrons. In fact, in 1674 Lully asked La Fontaine for a libretto for Daphne but ultimately rejected La Fontaine’s lyrical, graceful libretto for one written in a more

\[\text{66 Mackay, La Fontaine and His Friends, 42. Mackay does not elaborate on how the annulment helped the debts other than biens en commun (common good). It may have been a way to ensure her property was not used to pay his debts.}\]


heroic tone. It seems his “characteristic lyricism and irony were indeed unsuitable for opera librettos, where drama and simplicity are demanded.”

Although he worked hard and published a great deal, La Fontaine struggled financially until the end of his life and relied heavily on his wealthy patrons. And it was not until 1684 that he received significant recognition from his peers and was installed into France’s highest literary organization, the Académie Française. He had been elected the previous year but his admission was blocked by the king with whom he had a charged relationship. His final years were marked by a new devotion to the Catholic faith. Though he had studied religion when he was younger, and his brother had entered the priesthood, La Fontaine did not become devout until 1693. He famously disowned the Contes and burned his most recent play when a priest condemned it. La Fontaine’s health steadily declined over the next few years and he died in April of 1695.

La Fontaine’s fame primarily rests on his fables and ironic stories, but he also enjoyed variety and experimentation in his writing. His canon includes poems, occasional verse, and a novel. He first achieved recognition with the stories of Contes et nouvelles en vers, “poetic versions of old stories from many sources (medieval and Renaissance France, Boccaccio,

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https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uconn.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.15816
70 Mackay, La Fontaine and His Friends, 187.
71 Tales and stories in verse.
In these poems, La Fontaine combined irregular verse and rhyming couplets to weave stories of “cuckolds, lecherous priests, and wanton young women.” First published in 1664, La Fontaine continued to enlarge the work making it more and more scandalous as it increased in size (the Contes outnumber the fables by a wide margin). The 1674 edition of the Contes was banned and was later disowned by La Fontaine due to his religious conversion at the end of his life.

La Fontaine’s fables, all published between 1668 and 1694, are divided into twelve separate books. Numbering nearly two-hundred fifty, they were published in three volumes: the first (books one through six) in 1668, the second (books seven through eleven) in 1678, and the final book in 1694, a year before the author’s death. Cast as short poems with irregular lines, most of the fables teach lessons of moral philosophy through depiction of a vivacious, humorous animal world. By using animals to tell his tales, La Fontaine could cloak his criticism of the king, court, or politicians, in fun stories intended (at least in the first book) for children. In fact, the first publication of fables is, rather ironically, dedicated to the seven-year-old son of the king:

Thus he addresses the Dauphin of France, to whom he observes as well – in a long prose preface – that although Plato condemned the poets for their untruths, he recommended Aesop. The allegorical nature of those stories was up front, as it were, and their immediate subjects were animals known in everyday life; La Fontaine points out that if we can’t find or understand philosophers to teach us moral truths, bees and ants are there to give us what we need.

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74 Tramson, "La Fontaine, Jean de," n.p.
His later publications, while still influenced by Aesop, draw inspiration from contemporary history, politics and philosophy. In all of the fables, he embellishes the “straight moral of the usual fables with lyric descriptions of nature, picturesque portraits of characters, both men and animals, and lively dialogues.”

Anthropomorphic tales have been used widely by many authors whose works were meant for children and adults alike (C.S. Lewis, Mother Goose, and Vachal Lindsay among others). Their attribution of “human thought and discourse to members of the animal kingdom” grabs a child’s attention and imagination. The more specific intent of La Fontaine’s fables to “please and instruct” also fell in line with seventeenth-century France’s adherence to classicism, which sought to promote order, clarity, moral purpose, and good taste. This also pleased French parents and educators, thus cementing his place in contemporary French culture and education. In fact, to many native French children (particularly those in school during the middle part of the twentieth century) verses from certain of La Fontaine’s fables were as familiar as the stories of Mother Goose, the cartoons of Walt Disney, or the fairy tales of the Grimm brothers (though these do not contain the same educational aspects that permeate La Fontaine’s works). The fables were discussed at school, read as bedtime stories, and were quoted to teach lessons in times of misbehaving. Most convenient for parents, there was a fable for every offense, including

76 In his introduction to his translation of the Fables, Norman Shapiro talks of the content of the later books: “later fables have greater philosophical and literary complexity” and qualify more as contes (tales in the style of Contes et nouvelles en vers) than as fables. But whether they are “included with the fables since their first publication (by either La Fontaine or his publisher), they are traditionally part of the corpus.” La Fontaine, The Complete Fables, trans. Shapiro, xviii.
77 Tramson, "La Fontaine, Jean de," n.p.
neglecting work, being conceited, or becoming too vain. The lessons of his fables have become part of the cultural canon of the French over the past three hundred years.

Yet although La Fontaine moved among the great thinkers of the day and produced a body of work that has held great importance amongst French children and their parents over the past three centuries, he never received the same respect as his literary contemporaries. While he has “continually been the most popular of all, the most highly praised for three centuries, (he is) also the most unclassifiable, the most evasive, the least respectable of all our literary lares.” In his book *The Poet and the King*, Marc Fumaroli suggests that there is a “secret impulse that keeps the French from allowing its author (La Fontaine), whose stature seems too modest, into the club of Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante and Goethe.” Although he had undeniable wit, his indiscriminate criticism and blatantly brutal observations of human society most likely contributed to his relegation to the role of “Pedestrian of Paris.”

**Settings of La Fontaine’s Works**

The fame and popularity of La Fontaine’s fables have not been relegated to France alone but have made their way into the hearts and minds of children and adults all around the globe. The fables have been translated into more than fifty languages including English, German, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, Arabic, Japanese, Dutch, Polish, Swedish, Haitian Creole, Bulgarian, Korean, Persian, and Vietnamese. A search of two of the most popular song translation databases

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81 Fumaroli, *The Poet and the King*, 1.
82 Fumaroli, *The Poet and the King*, 1.
for classical singers, IPA source and Lieder.net (part of the REC Music Foundation), reveals that more than fifty of his works have been used in over two-hundred-fifty different musical settings in French, German, English, Russian, Hungarian, and Catalan. This is just a small sampling of the total scope of music influenced by La Fontaine’s works. The musical settings of his fables have been frequently composed as song cycles. One of these cycles, written in 1842 by Jacques Offenbach, used six of La Fontaine’s fables: *Le corbeau et le renard, Le rat des villes et le rat des champs, Le savetier et le financier, La laitière et le pot au lait, Le berger et la mer,* and *La cigale et la fourmi.* Benjamin Godard (1849-1895) also set six of the fables between 1872 and 1879, while André Caplet set three of La Fontaine’s fables to music. *La cigale et la fourmi,* La Fontaine’s most famous fable has been set to music by André Caplet, Camille Saint-Saëns, Maurice Delage, Benjamin Godard, Marcelle de Manziarly, Charles Trenet, Dmitri Shostakovich, and, of course, Isabelle Aboulker. Other composers who have dabbled in La Fontaine’s works include Pauline Viardot, Charles Gounod, Florent Schmitt, Paul Hindemith, Charles Lecocq, Alain Jacques, and Étienne Rey among others.

Although La Fontaine himself never found success in the theatre during his lifetime, later librettists found his works to lend themselves well to the *opéra comique* that developed in the eighteenth century. Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny (1729-1817) and librettist Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719-1797) collaborated on ten theatre works (primarily *opéra comique*), five of which were based on works of La Fontaine. Their first collaboration, *On ne s’avise jamais de tout* (‘You Can’t Think of Everything’), a one act *opéra comique* which premiered on September 14, 1761, was met with great acclaim. In fact, it was performed again on February 3, 1762 as a part of the
“first performance given by the Comédie-Italienne after its merger with the Opéra-Comique,” which was quite an honor. The fables also extend beyond the theater building. In 2005, Agat Films & Cie produced a television special, directed by Don Kent, staging nineteen of La Fontaine’s fables.

In addition to musicians, his works were frequently the inspiration for many great visual artists. From their first publications, the fables have been accompanied by artists’ renderings. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, poetry and painting were intimately linked due to “the concreteness which the picture could lend to an abstract idea played a considerable role, it was thought, in arousing the interest of the reader and in conveying to him the moral intention.” Since then many artists have contributed their vision of La Fontaine’s fables. Even modernist Marc Chagall created a series of etchings illustrating some of La Fontaine’s fables in the 1920s.

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Aboulker and La Fontaine

Isabelle Aboulker has always been particularly interested in writing music for children (she has composed over a dozen operas and four sets of songs for children); thus, like so many of her contemporaries, she was drawn to the writing of La Fontaine. In addition to those found in Femmes en Fables, she has set dozens of other La Fontaine fables. In 2000, Aboulker composed a children’s opera La Fontaine et le Corbeau - Fabl'Opéra which weaves seven fables by La Fontaine (Le corbeau et le renard, La grenouille qui se veut faire aussi grosse que le boeuf, Le loup et l'agneau, Le lièvre et les grenouilles, Le loup et le chien, La tortue et les deux canards, and Le lion devenu vieux) into a full-length story that can be performed with piano or small orchestra.

While La Fontaine et le Corbeau - Fabl'Opéra and Femmes en Fables both utilize the fables of La Fontaine, Aboulker also chose to set a prose selection from La Fontaine’s prosimetric novel, Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon. The novel was written in 1669 and is based on the Greek story of Psyche and Cupid. Aboulker takes the closing of the work, Hymne a la volupté, and sets it beautifully for soprano and piano.

86 Written partly in prose and partly in verse.
Additionally, it is possible that La Fontaine’s role as the “Pedestrian of Paris” also drew Aboulker to his writing. While La Fontaine’s works have remained some of the most well-known and celebrated in French literature, he never entered the elevated ranks of other great French writers. Aboulker may fall in a similar category. She did not succumb to the prevalent modernist style of the twentieth century and instead chose to keep her own voice and to write tonally. Her dedication to children’s music and her decision to primarily focus on vocal music may keep her from being considered a “serious” composer.

The four fables of Femmes en Fables were chosen by Aboulker from various collections of La Fontaine to create a collection of songs about women. Aboulker composed La jeune veuve and La cigale et la fourmi for specific singers in internal student competitions at the Paris Conservatoire. After their composition, Aboulker saw an opportunity to create a collection of songs for publication using women as the subject. The number of La Fontaine fables with actual humans is very small, and there are even fewer with women, so Aboulker’s choices for fables were limited. Despite her slim selection, Aboulker’s additional selections of La femme noyée and La chatte métamorphosée en femme provided a variety of female characters and an opportunity for great musical creativity.

Women are the driving force in Femmes en Fables. In each fable we see a different representation of a woman: in La jeune veuve a woman is actually given a voice, in La chatte métamorphosée en femme the female cat becomes an actual woman, albeit for the pleasure of the man, in La femme noyée a woman never appears but is the subject of the entire fable, and in La cigale et la fourmi the women are represented by the ant and the cicada. These fables revolve

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88 In French, insects are known by only one gender; thus La cigale et la fourmi provided Aboulker with a fable of two insects that are known by the feminine gender.
around women, but it is important to remember that their stories are told through the lens of a seventeenth-century man: perhaps not surprisingly, the women are presented in a misogynistic, often negative light.

La Fontaine’s fables are freely composed with irregular lines and lack a regular meter or rhyme scheme. La Fontaine was one of the early adopters of what became the “free verse” in the late nineteenth century. While the late nineteenth-century free verse increasingly abandoned traditional conventions of rhyme schedule and meter, La Fontaine’s free composition still obeyed a certain number of standard rules (particularly the alexandrine), even while utilizing flexibility and irregularity. La Fontaine’s verse was able to capture the “naturalness of prose in the formal but unobtrusive trappings of verse.”

Norman Shapiro describes La Fontaine’s style in this way: “His prosodic freedom – like the freedom of the natural universe in which his characters live their slices of life for us – is, in fact, one of his hallmarks and one of his greatest charms.” Aboulker mostly follows the line structure of the fables to construct her phrases but does not exclusively follow La Fontaine. She also does not set every line of the fables.

**Singing in French**

Now that we know more about Aboulker’s choice of text, have established what constitutes good vocal writing, and have considered what a voice teacher should be looking for

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89 The alexandrine was the most common form of French meter from the seventeenth until the end of the nineteenth centuries. It consisted of twelve syllables divided into two equal six syllable sections around a caesura “/”. David Hunter, *Understanding French Verse: A Guide for Singers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.


91 Shapiro, *Complete Fables of Jean de la Fontaine*, p. xix.

when assigning repertoire, we can take a closer look at how Aboulker’s vocal works could be a good choice for French contemporary music for the young singer. When American vocal students venture into singing, their study includes repertoire in the most common classical music languages: English, Italian, German, and French. Assuming English is a student’s native language, the normal progression of foreign language study is to first sing in Italian, then German, and lastly in French. The complexity of the French nasal vowel sounds makes the French language difficult for a non-native speaker. In addition, the voice teacher training a student to create an open, well-supported sound would do well to avoid having them sing nasal vowels before they have a good technical grasp as this may cause the student to sing too nasally and prove more detrimental than beneficial.

The complexities of the French language are not the only reason that French repertoire is often considered to be more difficult for the young singer. The French repertoire is also set apart from English, Italian, and German in that it relies more heavily on language and the textual interpretation. Richard Miller considers the role of the French language in music in his book *National Schools of Singing, English, French, German, and Italian Techniques of Singing*. In it he states that while French is “generally acknowledged to be the most ‘musical’ of Western languages…[it] makes greater demands that vocalized sound be closely bound to speech than is the case in any other European school of singing.” Miller argues that textual communication

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93 With only seven vowel sounds, and all of them pure vowel sounds, Italian is the best language to help students with vocal technique, and is often studied first in addition to the native language. German contains pure and mixed vowels and is introduced second. French is generally last in the list due to the complexity of vowel sounds, especially the nasal vowel sounds. “It is universally acknowledged that the sung Italian vowels serve as models of phonetic clarity for all other schools.” Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 186.

94 Miller, *National Schools of Singing*, 176.
has the “highest priority” for French singers and that the “character of the vocal literature of the French School serves to underscore both literary and linguistic heritages.”\textsuperscript{95} Like Fauré, Debussy, and Poulenc before her, Aboulker inextricably links music and text.\textsuperscript{96} For a native French singer this focus on language will not pose nearly as much of a problem as it will to the non-native, however with practice and linguistic study the singer will be able to connect the text to the music in the way the composer intended.

Bearing this in mind, while French may be a difficult language for a non-native singer, it does not mean that it should be avoided during undergraduate vocal study. Likewise, contemporary vocal music, though more of a challenge for the vocal novice, should not be avoided. As we discussed in the previous chapter, while some contemporary music should be avoided by all but the extremely well-trained singer, some contemporary vocal repertoire can benefit the younger singer. Contemporary music, often less melodically predictable and more harmonically complex, if composed well, can help a student with pitch and ear training. Aboulker’s music fills this very specific niche in the vocal repertoire for French contemporary music. It is important to remember that this is not a comprehensive study of her vocal works; merely an introduction and illustration of how she writes well and considerately for the voice.

\textsuperscript{95} Miller, \textit{National Schools of Singing}, 178.
\textsuperscript{96} Claude Debussy exemplifies the connection of the French language to the musical line. Many of his \textit{mélodies} are not tuneful in the way that composers like Puccini were writing, but instead restrained the voice in favor of the language. Martin Cooper says that “a beautiful voice is not the first requirement of a singer of Debussy’s songs; but good diction and poetic sensibility are indispensable.” Martin Cooper, \textit{French Music from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré} (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 97.
Textual Synopsis

Before addressing the pedagogical benefits of Aboulker’s settings, we would be remiss to not briefly synopsize each of these fables. A translation of each fable can be found in the appendix.

In *La jeune veuve*, a young widow swears faithfulness to her deceased husband. Though her suffering is great during the first year, La Fontaine stressed the great difference between the widow of one day and the widow of a year. When enough time has passed the widow’s father suggests she find another husband. Appalled at the thought, she cries that she will never have another man and should go to a convent. La Fontaine’s continued focus on the woman keeps the reader from sympathizing with the deceased husband, thus, when she comes out of mourning and asks her father for the young man he had promised her, the reader can be happy that the woman decided to carry on and enjoy her life after the death of her first husband.

In *La femme noyée*, we find a man searching for the body of his wife, who had ended her life by jumping in a fast moving stream, so he can give her a proper burial. While looking, the husband passes a group of men and asks if they had seen his wife. They, not knowing what had happened, callously suggest that he look upstream because a woman’s spirit of contradiction would have taken her in the opposite direction. La Fontaine concludes the fable indicating that while the man’s joke was inappropriate, anyone who is born with the spirit of contradiction will be buried with it.

*La chatte métamorphosée en femme* brings us the tale of a foolish man who wished and prayed his darling cat into a woman. Through magic or spells his wish was granted and he married her the very same day. Since he was madly in love he convinced himself that there was no drop of a cat still in her. However, when mice came back to the house the woman pounced to
catch the mice. This instinct to catch mice could not be subdued no matter what her new form may be.

Perhaps the most famous of La Fontaine’s fables, *La cigale et la fourmi* tells the story of the cicada and the ant. The ant worked all summer to store food and provisions for the winter while the cicada sang all day without a care in the world or concern for the coming winter. When the winter winds came the cicada pleaded with the ant to give her some sustenance. She begged and pleaded saying she will pay the ant back when spring returns. The ant is unmoved by the pleas of the cicada and asks her what she did all summer instead of preparing for winter. When the cicada replies that she sang night and day, the ant retorts that now she can dance the winter away.

**Femmes en Fables as “Good” Vocal Writing**

Using the rubric outlined in chapter three, we will now take a deeper look at the range, tessitura, phrase length, text/melodic setting, and harmonic setting of *Femmes en Fables* in order to make the case that Aboulker’s music is vocally appropriate for the younger singer.

The original publication of *Femmes en Fables* from 1999 has no voice-part classification of any kind. Not only is soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, or baritone not identified, but Aboulker does not specify even whether it is for high, medium, or low voice. The publisher (Alphonse Leduc) now lists the work for *voix moyenne* (average or medium voice) but other websites selling the score advertise it for soprano. In 2018, Alphonse Leduc published a collection Aboulker’s *mélodies* which include twenty-three selections. Though this book contains three of *Femmes en Fables* (*La jeune veuve, La femme noyée*, and *La cigale et la fourmi*), it also does not specify what voice type is best suited for the pieces. Aboulker does tend to indicate voice type,
as she has done so on other works. In the 2018 edition of her mélodies one piece is specified as a melodie pour voix légère (song for light voice) and another, humorously, as vocalise amoureuse pour soprano éperdue (amorous vocalise for distraught soprano).

In order to discern what type of singer for whom Femmes en Fables would be appropriate, we have to begin by looking at the range and tessitura. With no overt instruction regarding who can perform these pieces, they can be sung by a variety of voice types including both genders. But as the titles and textual content draw more female voices I will focus on the female voice types for which they are most appropriate.

The following chart shows the range and approximate tessitura for each piece in Femmes en Fables:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title of Piece</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Approximate Tessitura</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La jeune veuve</td>
<td>B♭3 to G#5</td>
<td>F4 to E♭5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La femme noyée</td>
<td>D4 to A5</td>
<td>G4 to F5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La chatte métamorphosée en femme</td>
<td>C♭4 to A♭5</td>
<td>F4 to E♭5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La cigale et la fourmi</td>
<td>B♭3 to F#5</td>
<td>F4 to D5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As previously discussed, Femmes en Fables was not composed as a song cycle, although it can be performed as such. If you were to consider the work as a whole, the singer would be required to sing a B♭3 to an A5. This is a large but accessible range available to many sopranos or mezzo-sopranos. This is a general reference point and by no means suggests that any soprano or mezzo-soprano would be comfortable singing these pieces (a very light soprano may find the occasional low B♭3 a difficulty, while not every mezzo-soprano may yet be comfortable singing an A5.). A voice teacher should, as always, use their discretion.
Regarding tessitura, all four pieces are reasonable and encompass less than an octave. The tessitura for three of the pieces is quite similar, although La femme noyée’s tessitura is slightly higher than the others. Thus I would discourage the performance of all four pieces as a full cycle for heavier soprano or mezzo-soprano voices, as well as young singers. And while some soprano voices may be able to sing all four pieces, I do not believe these pieces were necessarily intended to be sung together as a song cycle, but instead were created to be a neat collected group of works around a common theme for publication. That being said, a voice teacher could assign a young singer one of these four pieces and the right voice could truly shine.

As discussed in Chapter Three, **phrase length** is another important consideration for choosing music for the young singer, particularly because of how it relates to breath control development. The French have a unique approach to breath not shared by the Italian, German, or English schools of singing that Richard Miller describes as “natural breath.” Miller goes on to say that the French, in general, have no system of conscious breath control and “believe there is no essential difference between the actions of the breath mechanism in speech and those which take place in singing.”97 The French voice teachers who subscribe to this breathing technique focus more on musical factors believing the phrase will “dictate the control of the breath.”98 This interpretation of the breath management through text further reinforces our understanding of the intimate link between the music and the text in the French repertoire.

Aboulker’s compositional style follows in the lines of Fauré, Debussy, and Poulenc. She connects the music to the text and because of because of that, composes reasonable phrase

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lengths for her singers. Even when a phrase is longer there is a logical place to breathe, as in *La jeune veuve* measures 31-34.

![Example 5.1 La jeune veuve measures 31-34](image_url)

Though these measures are technically two phrases, a more advanced singer could make it through without a breath. A younger singer can certainly breathe at the phrase mark even though Aboulker does not give the singer much time to breathe in measure thirty-two. While somewhat difficult, this will help the singer learn to take a full, quick breath. In addition, because the breath would be in between piano notes, the singer is given slight clearance and the piano can join on beat three.

*La femme noyée* presents another potentially long phrase in measures 73-80, but allows the singer ample time to breathe.
Example 5.2 *La femme noyée* measures 73-80

The one consideration is from measure 78-80. Again, a more advanced singer can tackle these octaves without a breath, but the younger singer would be able to find a breath in the middle of measure seventy-eight. While there are a few challenging places, the overall phrase lengths in these pieces are “doable” for the younger singer.

In Chapter Three, we also established the importance of **text/melodic setting** and how the composer’s use of legato, leaps, and ascending or descending lines contribute to the text/melodic setting and can create a piece well composed for the voice. Proper notation can also affect a singer’s understanding of the text setting and Aboulker’s notation is meticulous. She writes exactly how she wants the performer to present a work using the articulation she believes best communicates the text. Due to the abundance of notated articulation, the singer can
understand the meaning of the text simply by how it as written. Measures 18-26 of _La jeune veuve_ give us a good example of Aboulker’s notational style.

Example 5.3 _La jeune veuve_ measures 18-26

Aboulker uses tenuti in the first four measures to indicate the emphasis on the second half of the first beat. The text reads “Enters the widow of a day and the widow of a year” and by emphasizing the second half of beat one, Aboulker creates a feeling of suspension in time so that the listener can picture how a widow may change within the course of a year. After a moment of reflection (a measure rest) she uses a decrescendo, accent, fermata, and staccato to emphasize “the difference (between the two) is great.” She finishes this contrast of the widow of a day and a widow of a year with a rapid staccato phrase: “we would never believe that it is the same person.” These accelerated staccato notes (note the poco accelerando) indicate disbelief and wonder at how time heals the pain of the widow. A more advanced singer with a better understanding of the music and language may choose to perform these pieces other than how
they are notated. However, this extreme notation can prove very useful to the young singer. They can use the composer’s explicit instruction to connect to the language and thus to better understand the piece.

As previously discussed, the French language is the most musical of all the traditional classical music languages. One of the reasons for this is how French words and phrases connect to create legato that seems to carry its own music. So it is with *Femmes en Fables*. The legato line helps the singer keep their voice connected to the breath *and* to the meaning of the text. That being said, Aboulker does not hesitate to use staccato to accentuate the meaning of a word or phrase. As in *La chatte métamorphosée en femme*: the woman, once a cat, sees a mouse.
Example 5.4 *La chatte métamorphosée en femme* measures 51-63

Her cat instincts take over as she stalks and pounces on the mouse, “When some mice who gnawed at the mat interrupted the joy of the new couple, immediately the woman is on her feet.” Although Aboulker marks this section with staccatos, it is to denote the feeling of catching a mouse, and even in this rapid and clipped section, the language connects to the melodic line allowing the singer to keep the sound open and free by using their breath.
Aboulker also makes great use of octaves and large leaps throughout the four pieces of *Femmes en Fables*. Although phrases may cover more than an octave, she never leaps more than a ninth from one note to the next (in only three places is there a leap larger than an octave). A voice teacher must be wary of assigning pieces with large leaps and must examine their setting carefully.

While Aboulker does put the large leap in the middle of a phrase or has the leap ascend a few times, in general, the leaps start on a high note and descend. This descent, as discussed in chapter three, is ideal for singing over a large range. One such section, in measures 35 and 36 of *La jeune veuve* (“at his side his wife cried,” says the text), Aboulker uses five leaps to depict the wailing cries of the widow, the upper notes moving chromatically while the lower notes remain static.

Example 5.5 *La jeune veuve* measures 35 and 36

While the first three leaps are large, the vowels on those notes are open: [a], [o], [a]. By using these open vowels Aboulker helps the singer keep an open sound thus reducing the risk of the singer closing their throat. In addition, the consonants used are aspirate, which also encourages

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99 *La jeune veuve* measures 51, 52, and 54, and *La femme noyee* pick-up to measure 17.
100 *La chatte métamorphosée en femme* measure 15-16, and *La jeune veuve* measure 9.
the singer to use breath and keep the throat open. Finally, by having each leap descend to the same note Aboulker focuses the singer’s attention on the high note, thus preventing them from dropping down completely to the low note which would make the leap back up more difficult. She even articulates this by slurring the descent from high to low. The final two leaps are in a less difficult place in the voice and can more easily produce the closed vowel sounds required.

A more difficult leaping section is found in *La chatte métamorphosée en femme* just after the cat has been magically transformed into a woman and been immediately married to the man: “Mad love now marked his honeymoon, where once fond folly was his lot. Never did fair lady’s charms so bewitch her suitor at all as completely as this new wife’s arms held her mad spouse in thrall.”

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Example 5.6 *La chatte métamorphosée en femme* measures 32-39

The descending line is sequenced creating a hypnotic feeling which may represent the magic or spell that turned the cat into a woman. The motive itself is descending, but it is in the sequence that we find our large leap. The singer can easily breathe after every other motive, but will have to do one leap without a breath. The breath comes nicely before the G5 (the highest note) which is exceedingly helpful for the singer.
To only look at the key signatures in each piece of *Femmes en Fables* would be a gross over-simplification of Aboulker’s approach to tonality and harmony. As discussed in Chapter Two, the French musical world was dominated by Pierre Boulez and IRCAM during most of Aboulker’s career. Despite being initially dismissed as too tonal, as atonality has loosened its grasp on the musical world Aboulker’s music has increased in popularity. Yet while her music is broadly tonal, in that it makes frequent use of triadic harmonies and pitch centricity, it does employ a modal fluidity and extensive chromaticism that the young singer may find challenging; nevertheless, such elements are extremely beneficial for ear training, pitch identification, and overall musicianship.

Although Aboulker does use key signatures, these frequently offer little guidance as to the actual tonal center. *La femme noyée* presents a clear example. In *La femme noyée*, the key signature begins in C major/A minor, even while the entire first section is clearly in G minor. The key changes to D major in measure 16 and Aboulker writes the beginning of this section in D major but ends in measure 28 tonicizing F♯ minor. Immediately after, the first theme repeats, returning to the C major/A minor that is actually in G minor. Measure 45 marks the beginning of a new section, and though the key signature does not change, we are (finally) fully in A minor. A minor continues until measure 69 when the section ends on a four measure F♯ minor chord. Another new section begins at measure 73 with a key signature change to F minor (the music is written in the corresponding key). The final key change happens at measure 89, returning again to the original key and a final iteration of the first theme. The song ends on a G minor chord.

This illustrates that although Aboulker does not always stay within the indicated key and may seem unexpected and strange, her writing does have a tonal center. This being said, it is up to the performer to decipher where the tonal center sits at any point in the piece. This will present
a healthy challenge to the young singer, as they will need to analyze the keys in order to identify the tonal center. The difficulty of the chromatic harmonies are helped by the melodic and harmonic lines working together in accompaniment. Although the singer must have a good sense of pitch in order to perform these pieces well, their harmonic knowledge can grow with proper analysis.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

The voice is a complex instrument that takes years to master. Therefore it behooves a singer to carefully develop their technique by working on repertoire that supports their vocal skill level, current abilities, and anticipated progression. Isabelle Aboulker’s vocal music provides a welcome example of French contemporary music that can do just that. This dissertation has offered an introduction to this unique composer, and attempted to determine what compositional elements make any particular piece of music well suited for the voice, subsequently applying that rubric to Aboulker’s collection *Femmes en Fables*.

*Femmes en Fables* could most aptly be described as a collection of pieces instead of a song cycle. While a female protagonist dominates each piece, any sense of a unifying concept ends there; the songs were most likely not intended to be performed together and it is therefore not advisable for a younger singer to perform all four as a set. That being said, a young singer could easily choose one (or more) of these pieces and benefit from enhanced vocal development, musicianship, and understanding of the French language. This is because the range and tessitura of each song, while not uniform, are never extreme and most can be sung by a soprano or mezzo-soprano. In addition, the reasonable phrase lengths help facilitate good breath control, and the melodic setting helps the singer better understand how text setting can contribute to a fuller performance, all while the variety of unusual intervals and harmonies challenges the singer.

Aboulker’s technical understanding of the voice allows her to create lines that, while still challenging, do not put undue stress on the vocal folds and, in fact, help the voice to develop. The singers are able, using their breath, to create the melodic line by connecting the text to the
notes in a natural, healthy way. Yet, the artistic value of her music appeals to more mature singers as well. For these reasons American university vocal programs would benefit from including her works in their repertoire selections.

While there are numerous writings on assigning vocal repertoire, this dissertation applies most specifically to compositional elements of a piece and the collaboration of composer with singer. The extensive biography on Isabelle Aboulker also provides information on a preeminent French composer not readily found in French or English. Contemporary classical music is not often assigned to the young singer. While this could be due simply to time constraints, there also exists a persistent distrust of the technical benefits (or lack thereof) of contemporary classical music. But if determined, a voice teacher can (and should) find repertoire that challenges the young singer without making unrealistic technical demands.

When in the practice room a singer builds a bond with a composer through their music, that bond is further enhanced when the singer feels their voice is understood and cherished so that the natural ease and beauty of the voice will emerge. That understanding can always be found in the capable compositional hands of Isabelle Aboulker and her *Femmes en Fables.*
APPENDIX

Translations of Femmes en Fables

LA JEUNE VEUVE – THE YOUNG WIDOW

La perte d'un époux ne va point sans soupirs.
The loss of a spouse does not happen without sighs.

On fait beaucoup de bruit et puis on se console.
We make a lot of sound and then we are consoled.

Sur les ailes du Temps, la tristesse s'envole,
On the wings of time, the grief flies away,
   le Temps ramène les plaisirs.
   the time revives joy.

Entre la veuve d'une année et la veuve d'une journée,
Between the widow of one year and a widow of one day
   la différence est grande.
   The difference is huge.

On ne croirait jamais que ce fût la même personne!
We would never believe that it was the same person!

   L'époux d'une jeune beauté partait pour l'autre monde.
   The spouse of a young beauty was leaving for the other world.

À ses côtés sa femme lui criait: "Attends-moi, je te suis!
At his side his wife cried: "Wait for me, I am with you!

Et mon âme aussi bien que la tienne est prête à s'envoler."
And my soul, as well as yours, is ready to take wing."

Le mari fait seul le voyage, la belle avait un père, homme prudent et sage,
The husband took alone the voyage, the beauty had a father, a man prudent and wise,
   il laissa le torrent couler.
   he let the flood (of tears) flow.

À la fin, pour la consoler,
At the end for a consolation,

"Ma fille, lui dit-il, c'est trop verser de larmes
"My daughter,” he said, “that’s too many shed tears
   qu'a besoin le défunt que vous noyiez vos charmes.
   what need the deceased that you drown your charms.

Puisqu'il est des vivants ne songez plus aux morts
Since it is the living think not anymore of the dead
   après un certain temps, souffrez qu'on vous propose
   after a certain time, allow me to offer you
un époux beau, bien fait, jeune, et tout autre chose que le défunt.
a handsome spouse, well built, young, and all-around better choice than the deceased.”

Ah ! fit-elle aussitôt!
“Ah!” She exclaimed at once!

Un cloître est l'époux qu'il me faut!”
“A cloister is the spouse that I need!”

Le père lui laissa digérer sa disgrâce.
The father let her digest her disgrace.

un mois de la sorte se passe.
a month in this way passed.

Le deuil enfin sert de parure, en attendant d'autres atours.
The mourning finally serves as adornment awaiting other finery.

Le père ne craint plus ce défunt tant chéri.
The father no longer fears the deceased as cherished.

Mais…Comm’il ne parlait de rien à notre belle.
But…as he spoke of nothing to our beauty

“Où donc est le jeune mari que vous m'aviez promis?” dit-elle.
“Where then is the young spouse that you have promised me?” She said.

LA FEMME NOYÉE – THE DROWNED WOMAN

Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent: ce n'est rien, c'est une femme qui se noie.
I am not of those that say, It is nothing, it is a woman who is drowned.

Je dis que c'est beaucoup et ce sexe vaut bien
I say that it is a great loss and this sex is well worth

que nous le regrettons, puisqu'il fait notre joie.
our mourning, since it is our joy.

Ce que j'avance ici n'est point hors de propos
What I offer here is not an irrelevant point

puisqu'il s'agit dans cette fable,
since it is in this fable that,

d'une femme qui dans les flôts avait fini ses jours par un sort déplorable.
a woman who in the waters had ended her life by a fate deplorable.

Son époux en cherchait le corps
Her spouse searched for her body

Pour lui rendre, en cette aventure les honneurs de la sépulture.
To give her, in this affair, the honor of a proper burial.

Il arriva que sur les bords du fleuve, auteur de sa disgrâce
It came to pass that on the bank of the river, creator of his disgrace
Des gens se promenaient ignorant l'accident.
Some men were walking by, ignorant of the mishap.

Ce mari donc, leur demandant
The husband then, demanded of them
   s'ils n'avaient de sa femme aperçu nulle trace.
   if they had seen any trace of his wife.

Nulle, reprit l'un d'eux, mais cherchez-la plus bas suivez le cours de la rivière.
None, replied one of them, but search further down follow the path of the river.

Un autre dit: Non! Ne le suivez pas!
Another said: No! Don’t follow it!

Rebroussez plutôt en arrière.
Rather retrace the other way.

Quel’que soit la pente et l'inclination
Whatever the slope and inclination
   dont l'eau par sa course l'emporte,
   of which the water by its course prevails,
   l'esprit de contradiction l'aura fait flotter d'autre sorte.
   the spirit of contradiction will have floated her upstream.

LA CHATTE MÉTAMORPHOSÉE EN FEMME –
THE CAT TRANSFORMED INTO A WOMAN

Un homme chérissait éperdument sa chatte. Il la trouvait mignonne et belle et délicate,
A man loved his cat madly. He thought (of) her darling and beautiful and delicate,
   Qui miaulait d'un ton fort doux, il était plus fou que les fous.
   Her little meow a very gentle tone, he was more crazy than the crazies.

Cet homme, donc, par prières et par larmes, par sortilèges et par charmes,
This man, then, by prayers and by tears, by spells and by charms,
   Fait tant qu'il obtient du destin que sa chatte en un beau matin
   Did so much that it became destiny that his cat on a beautiful morning
   Devient femme, et le matin même, Maître Sot en fait sa moitié.
   Became a woman, and that same morning, Master fool in fact his half.

Jamais la dame la plus belle ne charma tant son favori
Never did so beautiful a lady charm her suitor
   Que fait cette épouse nouvelle son hypocondre de mari.
   As this new spouse did to her bewitched husband.

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Il l’amadoue, elle le flatte; il n’y trouve plus rien de chatte,
He coddled her, she flatters him; he does not find anything of a cat,
Et poussant l’erreur jusqu’au bout,
And permitting error until the end,
La croit femme en tout et partout:
He found a woman all over:
Lorsque quelques souris qui rongeaient de la natte
When some mice who gnawed at the mat
Troublèrent le plaisir des nouveaux mariés.
Interupted the joy of the new couple.
    Aussitôt la femme est sur pieds.
        Immediately the woman is on her feet.
    Elle manqua son aventure.
        She missed her adventure,
Souris de revenir, femme d’être en posture.
The mice returned, the woman in her crouched posture.
    Car ayant changé de figure,
        Since having changed form,
    Les souris ne la craignaient point.
        The mice did not fear her.
    Ce lui fut toujours une amorce,
        This was always a fuse,
    Tant le naturel a de force.
        Such is the force of nature.
Il se moque de tout, certain âge accompli.
It scoffs at everything, when a certain age is realized.
Le vase est imbibé, l’étoffe a pris son pli.
The vase is soaked, the fabric took its fold.
    En vain de son train ordinaire
        In vain from its ordinary course
    On le veut désaccoutumer,
        One wants it to swerve,
    Quelque chose qu’on puisse faire,
        Something that we can do,
    On ne saurait le reformer,
        It cannot be reformed,
    Coups de fourche ni d’étrivières
        Blows of pitchfork and scourge
    Ne lui font changer de manières,
        Cannot make them change their ways,
Et, fussiez-vous embâtonnés,
And, (even if) you were armed,
Jamais vous n’en serez les maîtres.
Never will you be the master.
Qu’on lui ferme la porte au nez,
If you shut the door in its face,
Il reviendra par les fenêtres.
It returns through the windows.

LA CIGALE ET LA FOURMI – THE CICADA AND THE ANT

La cigale, ayant chanté Tout l’été,
The cicada, having sung all summer
Se trouva fort dépourvue
Found herself strongly lacking
Quand la bise fut venue:
When the north wind came:
Pas un seul petit morceau
Not a single little morsel
De mouche ou de vermisseau.
Of fly or of worm
Elle alla crier famine
She ran to cry famine
Chez la fourmi sa voisine,
To the aunt her neighbor,
La priant de lui prêter
Begging her to lend
Quelque grain pour subsister
Some grain for sustinance
Jusqu’à la saison nouvelle.
Just until the new season
“Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,
“I will pay you,” she said to her,
Avant l’aôût, foi d’animal,
“Before August, my word as an animal,

Intérêt et principal.”
Interest and princical.”
La fourmi n’est pas prêteuse;
The ant is not lending;
C’est là son moindre défaut.
It is not her least fault (we do not fault her)

“Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?
“What were you doing in hot weather?”

Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.
She said to this borrower.

—Nuit et jour à tout venant
—Night and day to all

Je chantais, ne vous déplaise.
I sang, if you please.

—Vous chantiez? j’en suis fort aise.
—You sang? I am very glad.

Eh bien! dansez maintenant.”
Well then! Now you will dance.”
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