



A Comparative Analysis of Reynaldo Hahn's and Gabriel Fauré's Settings of Paul Verlaine's "La Lune Blanche Luit Dans Les Bois"

JACOB GIANCATERINO 

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares Reynaldo Hahn's and Gabriel Fauré's musical settings of Paul Verlaine's poem, "La lune blanche luit dans les bois." Composing at the end of the 19th century, Hahn and Fauré were prominent figures in French musical culture—performing in the salons of the Parisian intelligentsia—and made significant contributions to the development of French art song. Despite having shared influences, their respective approaches to Verlaine's poem are highly individual. I begin by introducing Verlaine and the poem through the broader lens of the symbolist movement, followed by an original interpretation of the poem. Through my analysis, I provide insight into Fauré's and Hahn's harmonic languages, with an emphasis on their use of chromatic harmony, while highlighting unique characteristics of each setting and how they convey an individualized interpretation of the poem. I conclude by inviting additional exploration of Hahn's and Fauré's output to gain a further understanding of their musical languages, and by framing their works within the broader context of 19th century France.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Jacob Giancaterino

Virginia Tech, US

jacobg099@vt.edu

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In the latter half of the 19th century, two composers emerged as prominent writers of *mélodie*: Gabriel Fauré and Reynaldo Hahn.¹ Composing at the dawn of La Belle Époque, both men were prolific members of French musical society.² Their works were frequently performed in the salons of Paris, an elite social institution that functioned as a conduit through which knowledge and ideas flowed. Some of the most popular songs performed in this venue were settings of symbolist poetry, particularly the poems of Paul Verlaine. In this research, I compare Fauré's and Hahn's respective settings of Verlaine's poem, "La lune blanche luit dans les bois." Fauré and Hahn each wrote their setting of the poem between 1889 and 1894. Though the songs were composed within a close span of time, the composers approached the text in stylistically contrasting manners, with Fauré's harmonically explorative version of the poem serving as a foil to Hahn's relatively traditional setting. I will examine these contrasts below, as well as the music-text relationships of each song and their implications.

Hahn and Fauré both received an extensive musical education that had a significant impact on their compositional styles. Fauré began his eleven-year period of education at the École Niedermeyer in 1854, where he studied composition with Camille Saint-Saëns. He explored plainsong and Renaissance polyphonic music, as well as the compositions of contemporaries such as Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner. From these influences, he developed a style that "links the end of Romanticism with the second quarter of the 20th century and covers a period in which the evolution of musical language was particularly rapid."³ Fauré's progressive compositional style contrasts with Hahn's traditional way of writing, which is particularly evident in their settings of Verlaine's poetry. Influenced by the *mélodies* of his teacher, Jules Massenet, "Hahn's harmonic language was primarily conservative[,] while chromatic harmony, taking a foothold in the latter half of the 19th century, is a key component of Fauré's idiom."⁴

It was in the Parisian salons that Fauré and Hahn garnered their reputations through performances for the social elite. In 1871, Fauré was introduced to the salons of Saint-Saëns and Pauline Viardot, "where he met [...] members of Parisian musical society[,] often premiering his works for these audiences."⁵ Hahn was introduced to high musical society at an even younger age, singing and playing his own accompaniments in the salon of Madeleine Lemaire at the age of nineteen.⁶

Among the songs performed for the French elite by Fauré and Hahn were their respective settings of Paul Verlaine's poetry. Verlaine inspired some of the two composers' most beloved *mélodies*. A leading figure of the symbolist movement, Verlaine is noted for his contributions to the evolution of French prosody, helping initiate a shift away

from the rigid alexandrine structure of twelve syllables-a-line towards the freer verse form and uneven lines of vers impairs.⁷ The metrical freedom of this style allowed for a greater sense of musicality, a characteristic that bolstered Verlaine's appeal among song composers. In 1872, while engaged to his muse Mathilde Mautere, Verlaine published *La Bonne Chanson*, a collection of 21 poems celebrating the joy and splendor of life. The sixth poem of the set, "La lune blanche luit dans les bois," has been set to music by dozens of composers, including Fauré and Hahn.

The symbolist aesthetic emerged in the latter half of the 19th century as a reaction to Naturalism and Realism, philosophies cultivated by the Romantics. Characterized by the representation of human ideals and truth through metaphorical imagery, the style "features a kind of open-ended evocation of meanings [...] achieved by assembling unresolved actions and questions, as well as conflicting blocks of images, in the text."⁸ Verlaine's "La lune blanche luit dans les bois" is a prototypical example of symbolist poetry:

La lune blanche	The white moon
Luit dans les bois;	Gleams in the woods;
De chaque branche	From every branch
Part une voix	There comes a voice
Sous la ramée...	Beneath the boughs...
Ô bien aimée.	O my beloved.
L'étang reflète,	The pool reflects,
Profond miroir,	Deep mirror,
La silhouette	The silhouette
Du saule noir	Of the black willow
Où le vent pleure...	Where the wind is weeping...
Rêvons, c'est l'heure.	Let us dream, it is the hour.
Un vaste et tendre	A vast and tender
Apaisement	Consolation
Semble descendre	Seems to fall
Du firmament	From the sky
Que l'astre irise...	The moon illumines...
C'est l'heure exquise. ⁹	Exquisite hour.

The poem is infused with symbols—the white moon, the voice, the black willow—and ambiguous imagery that leaves the meaning of the text undefined, allowing sufficient liberty for exegesis. I interpret the poem as a nostalgic reminiscence of a lost love. The poem is structured as three stanzas of five lines, with a single line

following each stanza. The first depicts the setting: the white moon shining in the woods, where a voice is heard from each branch beneath the bower. I read the speaker's address to a loved one in the intervening line as a longing remembrance, with the voice in the trees representing the speaker imagining they are in the presence of someone dear from the past. This interpretation is substantiated through the weeping wind in the second stanza, which I take as representing the speaker's sadness at the beloved's departure. Perhaps they are strolling through a wood they once visited with the loved one, as the wind weeps at the sight of the speaker now wandering in the moonlight alone. Though there are nostalgic undertones in this poem, the tone is bittersweet. The speaker describes a tranquil setting, while fondly recalling the lost love through a peaceful reverie. Detached from reality, they are left in a perpetual state of ecstasy. Having posed my interpretation of Verlaine's poem, I will now provide a brief comparative analysis of harmony, affect, and text painting in Hahn's and Fauré's respective settings.

A striking point of comparison between these two settings is the different approaches to harmony. Hahn sets the poem in the key of B major and uses a limited harmonic vocabulary throughout the song. The harmony itself is primarily diatonic; however, secondary dominants appear in the final stanza. Hahn's phrase model follows the ubiquitous tonic-predominant-dominant-tonic schema.

The chord progression in mm. 11–17 is an example of Hahn's use of this phrase model to organize harmonic progression, leading to an IAC in m. 17. A similar example can be found in mm. 22–28 (see [Exs. 1–2](#)).

In both examples, Hahn uses vi and iii to prolong the initial tonic. There are only a few instances in which he subverts harmonic expectations. In m. 33, Hahn manipulates the recurring ostinato figure from the first and second stanzas by raising the D# in the tenor voice to E#, with the bass moving to C#, creating a V^9/V that should lead to V. In the following measure, the bass moves to the expected scale degree 5, but rather than supporting a V chord, Hahn resolves to I_4^6 . This results in a deceptive resolution above the bass. A similar situation occurs in mm. 36–37, with V_2^4 moving to the expected scale degree 3, forming a vii^{o7}/IV above the bass rather than the anticipated I^6 (see [Ex. 3](#)).

Hahn's sparse use of chromatic harmony is contrasted by Fauré's abundant use of chromaticism. In m. 5, Fauré briefly tonicizes ii—placing special emphasis on predominant function—followed by V_2^4 -I on beats 1 and 2 in the subsequent measure (see [Ex. 4](#)). Due to the inversion and metrical position of this resolution to tonic, it does not leave the listener with the sense of repose that is imparted by a cadence.

Another tonicization of ii begins in mm. 8–9, leading to a descending fifths sequence of applied dominant sevenths in mm. 11–12 that prepares the arrival of V^7 in m. 12. The

The image displays a musical score for measures 11-17 of Hahn's setting. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 11-14. The vocal line has the lyrics "voix Sous la ra - mé - e...". The piano part includes chord labels: I (measure 11), vi (measure 12), ii (measure 13), and 6 (measure 14). The second system shows measures 15-17. The vocal line has the lyrics "Ô bien - ai - mé". The piano part includes chord labels: V^9 (measure 15) and I (measure 17). Dynamics include *p* and *pp*.

Ex. 1 mm. 11–17.

flète, Pro-fond mi-roir, La si-lhou-et te Du sau-le
noir Où le vent pleu-re... Rê-vons!

I vi iii vi ii V⁹ I

Ex. 2 mm. 22-28.

Un vaste et ten-dre Apai-se-ment Sem-ble des-cen-dre Du fir-ma-ment
Que l'astre

vii0⁵/V V⁹/V I₄ V⁴₃/V V⁷/V V₄² vii0⁷/IV

Ex. 3 mm. 33-37.

PAC in m. 13 marks the first cadential climax of the song (see Ex. 5). The extended tonicization of ii and the sequence of applied dominants together prolong predominant function, thus creating a chromatic expansion of traditional harmonic functions.

Similar sequential motion occurs in mm. 20–22, momentarily tonicizing Ab, the enharmonic equivalent of II in F# major (see Ex. 6). What differentiates this sequence

from the first is that, rather than V⁶/V/II resolving to V/II, the progression moves to I/II (the subsequent V/II in m. 22 functions as a back-related dominant). Unlike the first sequence that leads to a cadence in F# in mm. 11–12, the second transitions to an extended tonicization of natural iii (A) of F# in mm. 25–27.

Further points of comparison between these two settings of Verlaine’s poem lie in Hahn’s and Fauré’s fixation

Ex. 4 mm. 5–6.

Ex. 5 mm. 8–13.

La silhouette de Du

sauve le noir

Chord symbols: V^7/bII , $V^6/V/V/II$, $V^6/V/II$, I^6/II , I^4/II , I/II , V/II , V^4/II , V^6/II

Ex. 6 mm. 20–22.

on individual scale degrees, exemplified through common tone progressions and prolongations. In Hahn's setting, the first 12 measures feature a repeated ostinato figure that is harmonized with I and vi, adding iii in m. 9 (see Ex. 7). The common tone of D# in each chord links the harmonies together, each functioning as tonic, prolonging I prior to the move to the dominant in m. 15. Fauré uses common-tone expansion the same way, prolonging tonic with a series of tangentially related tonic triad/seventh chords in mm. 6-7 (see Ex. 8).

Further, in m. 36, Fauré initiates an extended prolongation of flat scale degree 6 (D natural) through a string of common-tone dominant harmonies, creating tension in the bass that resolves down a half-step to scale degree 5 in m. 40 with the cadence on the third beat (see Ex. 9). This cadence shifts the common tone to F#, with the V^7/bII in m. 36 now appearing in m. 42 as a Ger^{*6} .

Fauré's use of prolongation by scale degree is further evinced in mm. 16–17 through the tonicization of the neapolitan (see Ex. 10). This figure is repeated in mm. 19–20, conflicting with the tonicization of II that immediately follows. With the tonicizations of ii in the first stanza still in the listener's ear, this section creates tension

between the flat and diatonic variants of the second scale degree. In Hahn's setting, scale degree 3 is given special treatment throughout the song. In every phrase of the work, he centers the vocal line around scale degree 3 through repeated D#'s, while the first 12 harmonies of the song contain scale degree 3 with the repeated use of I, vi, and iii (see Ex. 7). What is more, Hahn employs expressive leaps to D# in several significant moments in the text. His centering around scale degree 3, and not 1, contributes to the nebulous character of the song.

In addition to Fauré and Hahn's varying use of chromatic harmony, they each create a unique affect in their settings.¹⁰ We know that Hahn's active role as a salon performer strongly influenced his compositions, as "[h]is songs, most likely written for himself to be performed in salons, have a range which seldom goes beyond an octave and a fourth. The dynamics are modest and the accompaniments have a thin texture. All of these traits create a charm, an atmosphere, which was suited for the temperament of the salon."¹¹ In this setting, for example, there are several distinct qualities that create an atmosphere reminiscent of the salon. In the first three systems, Hahn's choice to use one harmony per measure

p
La lu - ne blan - che

pp
I vi I vi I

2 2
Luit dans les bois; Decha - que bran - che Part u - ne

vi I vi iii vi

voix / Sous la ra - mé - e...

I vi

Ex. 7 mm. 1-12.

bran - che - part u - ne voix

V³ I iii⁶ vi⁷ iii iii²

Ex. 8 mm. 6-7.

ment que l'as - tre i - ri - se

V^7/bII V^2/iii V^7/bII V^7/bV V^3/bV $vii\emptyset^7/vi$ V^7

I Ger^{+6}

pp

Ex. 9 mm. 36-42.

L'é-tang re - flè - te,

p

pp

i V^6/bII ii^3/bII V^7/bII ii^2/bII V^5/vi

profond - mi - roir, La sil - hou

vi I I^6 i V^6/bII ii^3/bII V^7/bII $V^6/V/V/II$ $V^6/V/II$

Ex. 10 mm. 16-20.

contributes to the overall placidity and unhurried feel of the song. The languid feeling evoked through the lackadaisical harmonic rhythm and the arpeggiated ostinato figure in the accompaniment creates a dream-like character that is apt to lull the listener into a peaceful reverie. The intimacy of the salon is further conveyed through the song's soft dynamic range, from *ppp-p*, coupled with the stepwise contour of the vocal line.

Fauré creates his own individual affect. Like the quick brush strokes of a Renoir painting, Fauré uses a brisk harmonic rhythm, often three chords to a bar, and chromatic harmony as hues from his palette of expressive devices. This requires more active engagement from the listener than the relaxed, largely diatonic texture of Hahn's setting, which arguably makes Fauré's setting less tranquil in nature. This discrepancy may suggest that Fauré and Hahn each interpreted the poem in a different way. Hahn may have understood the calm, relaxed nature of the speaker's dream as a reflection of the dream's duration—implied through his reserved use of harmony, rhythm, and dynamics—while Fauré may have interpreted the dream as a momentary haze; a daydream. This could explain the faster harmonic rhythm and distant harmonies in Fauré's setting, creating an overall greater sense of urgency.

Fauré's and Hahn's musical treatment of the text comprises the final point of my analysis. In the first stanza, the mystique that is derived from the description of the vivid setting—the moonlit night, the voice in the trees—creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that is reflected in both composers' settings. Both Fauré and Hahn represent this ambiguity by delaying the assurance provided by a cadence for the entirety of the first stanza; Hahn achieves this delay through tonic prolongation, while Fauré prolongs predominant through an expansion of ii. The first cadential progression occurs on “o my beloved,” in m. 11–13 in Fauré's setting (see [ex. 5](#)), and mm. 15–17 in Hahn's (see [ex. 1](#)). This is a significant moment in both songs. The progression not only marks a shift in the dynamic of the poem, through the added element of pathos via the introduction of love, but also solidifies the tonal center in each setting. The stability of the cadence at the first mention of a lover beckons to the resolute, unwavering qualities of the speaker's love. Hahn approaches the cadence in a diatonic context, while Fauré arrives from a realm of tonal ambiguity, following the aforementioned applied chord sequence. Fauré's sudden, unexpected cadential arrival arguably makes this moment in the text more impactful, indicating the speaker's abrupt recollection of memories of the beloved. Conversely, the nostalgia produced by the speaker's address to the beloved is more anticipated in Hahn's setting, foreshadowed by the diatonic preparation of the cadence.

These nuances in cadential preparation are further compounded by the varying musical responses to the meaning of the text. While Hahn creates expression through the leap to D# in m. 17 in a *pp* dynamic, Fauré employs a melodic ascent to scale degree 1, strengthened by quick, forceful harmonic shifts that grow from *p* to *f* in mm. 9–13. This variance in expression and cadential treatment is perhaps an implication of the composers' differing conception of the profundity of the speaker's emotions. The drive of Fauré's cadence—the growing intensity provided by the crescendo, ascending melodic line, and harmonic momentum—portrays the speaker as suddenly overcome by passion and emotion, representing the temperamental nature of love and memories, while Hahn's setting suggests a gradual sigh that swells with the leap in m. 16. The absence of accompaniment, leaving the vocal line exposed, creates a level of intimacy that is not found in Fauré's setting. This, in addition to the chromatic inflection in the vocal line, produces an atmosphere of quiet longing.

Analyzed in tandem, Reynaldo Hahn's and Gabriel Fauré's settings of Paul Verlaine's “La lune blanche luit dans les bois” demonstrate their individual responses to Verlaine's text, varying in harmonic language, affect, and text painting. My analyses demonstrate the interpretative nuances in the songs manifest through disparities in musical language. Further, these works provide understanding into the aesthetic tastes and preferences of the French salon; that in a period of cultural and artistic advancement, both progressive and traditional approaches to composition were accepted among audiences. This comparison invites additional exploration of Fauré's and Hahn's output to further investigate discrepancies in harmonic language. Juxtaposing their settings of this poem with those of other composers who set this text would also provide insight into how Fauré and Hahn convey textual meaning in their music. These works, composed within a few years of each other in the late 19th century, represent their contrasting compositional styles. Regardless of their differences, Fauré's and Hahn's “atmospheric and evocative *mélodies* are ‘of a time,’” carrying the listener back to the intimacy and splendor of the salon.¹² As the sun set on the *mélodie*, their works represent an inspired moment in the history of French Art Song. “C'est l'heure exquise.”

NOTES

1 *Mélodie* is a French song form that emerged in the 1840s, influenced by the declining *romance* and Schubert's *Lieder*.

Fritz Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1970), 1, <https://books.google.com/books?id=IYPdofcdcNUC&pg=PP1&ots=7ZMHY835bx&dq=>

[french%20melodie&lr&pg=PR4#v=onepage&q=french%20melodie&f=false](#).

- 2 La Belle Époque is a period of cultural and artistic prosperity in France ca. 1880–1914.
- 3 Jean-Michel Nectoux, “Fauré, Gabriel,” *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 16 Nov. 2020. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.09366>.
- 4 Thea Sikora Engelson, “The *Mélobies* of Reynaldo Hahn.” PhD thesis, The University of Iowa, 2006, pg. 352.
- 5 Nectoux, “Fauré, Gabriel,” Chapter 1.
- 6 Engelson, “The *Mélobies* of Reynaldo Hahn,” pg. 16.
- 7 Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins North America, 2008), 23, <https://books.google.com/books?id=JcFHAAAQBAJ&lpg=PA1&dq=symbolist%20movement&lr&pg=PA23#v=onepage&q=alexandrine&f=false>.
- 8 David Michael Hertz, *The Tuning of the Word: The Musico-literary Poetics of the Symbolist Movement* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), xii, <https://books.google.com/books?id=XkbZqYMLBsAC&lpg=PP1&dq=symbolist%20movement&lr&pg=PR12#v=onepage&q=unresolved%20actions&f=false>.
- 9 Paul Verlaine, “La lune blanche luit dans les bois,” Translated by Richard Stokes, Oxford, 2000.
- 10 The feelings and moods derived from a piece of music.
- 11 Engelson, “The *Mélobies* of Reynaldo Hahn,” pg. 16.
- 12 Engelson, “The *Mélobies* of Reynaldo Hahn,” pg. 354.

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AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Jacob Giancaterino  orcid.org/0000-0002-6106-2390
Virginia Tech, US

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