

YOUNG CLASSICAL WRITERS PRIZE 2021



Give in to the sweetness of Lili Boulanger's *Les sirènes*

by **Lillian Crawford** (age 22) – specially commended

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the witch Circe warns Odysseus that he will pass the Sirens, a flock of winged women who lure sailors to death by singing. It's curious that Circe doesn't tell Odysseus to block his own ears with wax for protection against the Sirens' lyrical lure as she does his crew. Instead, he is tied to the mast of his ship so he can listen without being drawn in – Homer evokes music so beautiful that it inspires the listener to give up their life to find its source.

The last concert I attended prior to the COVID-19 pandemic was on International Women's Day 2020. There was already a sense that something catastrophic was in the offing, so I was desperate to indulge in as much live music as I could. The concert, given by the Cambridge University Music Society, was dedicated to French composer Lili Boulanger. Lili is perhaps less famous than her sister Nadia partly because Nadia taught many of the greatest composers of the twentieth century, including Philip Glass. But the main reason Lili Boulanger isn't a household name is because she died, tragically, aged just twenty-four.

I first heard her music during the 2018 BBC Proms which marked the centenary of her death. I loved all her works, including the cantata *Faust et Hélène* which made her the first female winner of the prestigious Prix de Rome aged nineteen. But there was one piece which set my heart aflame, a piece rarely seen on concert programmes but thankfully on the one I attended last March: *Les sirènes*, her 1911 setting of text by Charles Grandmougin.

The piece is striking not simply because it is an imagining of what the sublimity of the Sirens' song - fantasised only in text by Homer and Grandmougin - would actually sound like, but because it emerges from the pure musicality of a young woman. It is difficult to describe how exactly one senses gender in music, but I do know that, sitting in an auditorium on International Women's Day as a woman of similar age to Boulanger herself when she wrote *Les sirènes*, I was overcome with a sense of personal connection cutting across time. It was as if her hand was reaching out, inviting me to take it, and then disappearing soundlessly beneath the ripples of the ocean.

This entrancing effect is engineered in the notation – Boulanger repeats ascending C-sharp octaves for twenty-eight bars on the piano at the beginning to lull the listener into a sleep-like state. During this gently swelling passage the three-part choir sing in the round, depicting the Sirens flying around the ship and the nearby whirlpool, Charybdis. The music is seductive, which Boulanger uses to control the listener.

The piano quickens its rising and falling semiquavers as the Sirens close in and a solo soprano voice emerges. It's a lullaby priming you to give in to its spell and drift off into endless sleep. And just as you do, the choir is back, the whole flock still in the round but closer together now, building to an orgasmic climax which makes literal the French expression '*la petite mort*'. Then the Sirens drift away, satisfied with their meal, and the waters settle. Mythology brought vividly to musical life by an eighteen-year-old woman of the *fin-de-siècle*.

Les sirènes is a unique accomplishment of French Impressionism which should have cemented Lili Boulanger's position alongside male composers like Claude Debussy or Erik Satie. Perhaps that's the real tragedy of the Sirens' song – that our thirst for more remains unquenched.

Lillian Crawford