

**WORKS PERFORMED**

Three Sonnets of Louise Labé (1522-1566)

I. "O beaux yeux bruns" ("O soft brown eyes")

Tune: "O doux regards," Antoine Gardane  
Jenna Anderson, Soprano  
Recorder Consort: Michelle Matts, Gary White, Blake Morris

II. "O si j'étais en ce beau sein" ("O if my soul were ravished out of me")

Tune: "Fortune My Foe," Traditional English  
Sarah Wendt, Contralto  
String Band: Becca Longhenry, Raphael Seligmann, Blake Morris

III. "'Claire Vénus, qui erres par les cieux" ("Bright Venus, as you wander through the spheres")

Original Tune: Fiona Walkington  
Fiona Walkington, Voice and Guitar

*Texts of the three sonnets with interpretive notes and verse translations by Raphael Seligmann are provided on the following pages.*

**ABOUT LOUISE LABÉ**

Louise Labé was born in 1522 in Lyons. The daughter of a prosperous rope maker, she was given a humanistic education and became fluent in Italian and Latin. She married another Lyonnaise rope maker, Ennemond Perrier, and their household became a salon for poets and scholars. As was the typical fate of female intellectuals at the time, she was widely accused of being a courtesan. John Calvin was among her detractors. It is known that she had a long-running affair with the poet Olivier de Magny (who eventually turned on her), but the evidence does not show that her relationships with other humanists, such as Maurice Scève, were sexual.

The racy image that accompanies her to this day stems in part from her willingness (and freedom as a wealthy, educated *bourgeoise*) to flout restrictive gender roles, first of all by assuming the right to mingle with men as an intellectual equal and, second, by adopting a provocative personal style, which included a George Sand-like predilection for men's clothing. The image also results from a conflation of biographical fact and the literary stance Labé often adopts – that of a woman dedicated to the pursuit of passion. In her poetic persona, she consciously identifies herself with Sappho, celebrates physical love, and speaks from the perspective of a female wooer. Her 24 sonnets either critique or blithely disregard the form's traditional gender polarity of male poet / wooer, female muse / object.

Although Labé's personal reputation suffered because of the literary and social risks she took, her merit as a writer was never in question. The sonnets have always been particularly admired. Four editions appeared between 1555 and 1566, the year of her death. Today, she occupies a secure place in the literary canon, and her life is frequently cited as a case study in the opportunities and perils experienced by women intellectuals in the French renaissance.

## ABOUT THE SETTINGS

Some early sonnets were likely conceived as musical works. Etymologically, *sonnet* is probably derived from the Italian verb *sonare*, to play on (literally “to sound”) an instrument. Mid-sixteenth century sonnets by poets such as Sir Thomas Wyatt include lines about the poet singing the verse accompanied by a lute. In Labé’s own sonnet XII, “Luth, compagnon de ma calamité” (“Lute, sounding board of my calamity”), the poet-speaker describes composing the poem as a process in which she discovers the words while hunched over a lute, her tears dripping onto the instrument’s body. It is also plausible that sonnets were given musical treatment for public performance. Since members of the cultural elite were expected to demonstrate their vocal and instrumental skills in salon-like social events, artists like Labé may well have tried to maximize the impact of their new poems by performing them musically, not just reciting them.

No contemporary musical settings of sonnets from the period survive, however, so any modern musical performance requires invention. To prepare this program, Jefferson Baroque has used three creative approaches.

For sonnet II, we chose a historically defensible expedient: inserting Labé’s lyrics into a song from the same time and place as her sonnets. Antoine Gardane (1509-1569) was a French composer living in Venice, whose works were published in both Lyons and Paris in the 1550s. The text of one of his songs, “O doulx regard” (“O sweet glance”), from 1553, so closely resembles sonnet II that it could easily be a parody of it or an inspiration for it. Only the repetition of two lines was necessary to make the lyrics fit Gardane’s composition.

For sonnet XIII, we attached the lyrics to an English ballad tune from the period, best known as “Fortune my foe.” While it has no textual or historical connection with Labé, the tune’s rhythms fit the poem’s words almost perfectly, and the minor-key melody fits the poem’s mood of passionate longing.

For sonnet V, we follow the course that is best honors the creative spirit of the brilliant young poet: turning over the task of setting the verse to the brilliant young singer/songwriter Fiona Walkington.

For more information about this program or Jefferson Baroque, contact [raphael.seligmann@gmail.com](mailto:raphael.seligmann@gmail.com).

**LOUISE LABÉ SONNETS PERFORMED BY JEFFERSON BAROQUE, CRRVA 2/2/2020**

<p>O beaux yeux bruns, ô regards détournés,  O chauds soupirs, ô larmes épandués,  O noires nuits vainement attendues,  O jours luisants vainement retournés;  O tristes plaints, ô désirs obstinés,  O temps perdu, ô peines dépendues,  O mille morts en mille rets tendues,  O pires maux contre moi destinés!  O ris, o front, cheveux, bras, mains et doigts;  O luth plaintif, viole, archet et voix:  Tant de flambeaux pour ardre une femelle!  De toi me plains, que tant de feux portants,  En tant d'endroits d'iceux mon cœur tâtant,  N'en est sur toi volé quelque étincelle.</p>	<p>O soft brown eyes, O glances turned away,  O ardent sighs, O tears that fall like rain,  O long dark nights of waiting up in vain,  O shining dawn day after empty day,  O heartsick blues, O lust's incessant sway,  O waste of time, O bite of needless pain,  O traps that kill again and yet again,  O trouble that has come again to stay!  O smile, O brow, hair, arms, hands fingertips;  O melancholy lute, viol, voice and lips —  So many sparks to set a girl aflame!  It's you I blame, who have the fuel to start  A fire in that place that stirs my heart  But never once are kindled by the same.</p>

There is a quotient of erotic playfulness in this lament, some of it built into the poem's sonic construction. Try speaking the lines in front of a mirror, pronouncing the repeated "o" sounds in the French manner with a tightening of the lips. Take a breath at every comma. The physical results are striking to watch. Then listen to the pattern of the words and pauses, the way the o's divide the first two lines of each quatrain into four half-line phrases, each phrase imparting a simple image of passion, followed by two unbroken lines expressing more sustained, subtle and troubling thoughts. Note how the symmetry and rhythm break down in the ninth line, when the o-sounds briefly become attached to a catalogue of the lover's physical attributes and then drop away in an onrush of single-word blurts. [The return of the "o" at the start of line ten marks the shift from visual to aural associations and, like the unexpected appearance of an adjective (*plaintif*), retards the race toward the climactic eleventh line.] The sudden jump from body parts (line 9) to string instruments (line 10) is not as odd as it might seem: the playing of lutes and viols was deemed strongly provocative in the renaissance. I do not give a faithful reading of the last line, with its literally sparkling final image (*étincelle* = spark); instead, "by the same" sends the reader back to the beginning to recreate the poem's pleasurable pains all over again.

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XIII	XIII
<p>O si j'étais en ce beau sein ravie  De celui-là pour lequel vais mourant,  Si avec lui vivre le demeurant  De mes courts jours ne m'empêchait envie,  Si m'accolant me disait: «Chère amie,  Contentons-nous l'un l'autre, s'assurant  Que jà tempête, euripe, ne courant  Ne nous pourra déjoindre en notre vie»:  Si de mes bras le tenant accolé  Comme du lierre est l'arbre encerclé,  La mort venait, de mon aise envieuse,  Lorsque souef plus il me baiserait  Et mon esprit sur ses lèvres fuirait,  Bien je mourrais, plus que vivante, heureuse.</p>	<p>O if my soul were ravished out of me  Into the breast of him for whom I die;  If jealousy did not intrude and I  Could live with him, however fleetingly;  If he should say, embracing me, "Dear heart,  Let's settle down together, satisfied  That neither gale nor deluge nor riptide  Could ever tear the two of us apart;"  If, holding him like ivy round an oak,  I should in sweetest ecstasy provoke  Mortality to envy my success,  My soul, responding to my lover's kiss,  Would stream out through my lips and rush to his,  And death, not life, would crown my happiness.</p>

Special difficulties are posed by the jargon of ravishment and soul-union, for which there is no modern equivalent. No rendering of the lines into English can do much to help readers unfamiliar with the renaissance notion that the spirit could be drawn out of a person's body – temporarily, in a state called *ecstasy* or *ravishment* – by a lover's kiss. Without that background, Labé's language may seem merely overheated, even vampirish. Read in light of the humanist intellectual culture that it engages, however, this sonnet offers a provocative take on the then-familiar neo-Platonic doctrine of love. According to this doctrine, the ravishment of one soul by another was the first step up a "ladder of love" which would culminate in an inspired perception of *eros* as a universal, life-giving principle. Something goes wrong with this scheme in Sonnet XIII, however. Instead of leading the way toward transcendence, ecstasy lands the poet in the clutches of death. In fact, the embrace that triggers the ecstasy is the very signal that summons *la mort envieuse*. Nonetheless, while the ending of the poem may suggest a Tristan-like *liebestod* is being substituted for divine enlightenment as the ultimate end of love, the implied situation of the poet in the moment of utterance argues against such a dualistic interpretation. The fantasy scenario that occupies the central section reveals, rather, that the outcome most desired is neither transcendence nor obliteration but enduring shelter from the storms of life. The problem is that the poet is too aware of the obstacles keeping her and her lover apart to believe in such a dream. I read the concluding lines as a vote for the lesser of two evils. Happiness cannot last – mortality will see to that. Since the days remaining to her are numbered (*mes courts jours*), it would be better to expire in a moment of bliss than to live through the moment only to separate again. The conditional constructions throughout the poem emphasize that the safe harbor is not an achievable option. Even the lover's longed-for words do not hold the promise that she seeks: all he actually offers is an invitation to *believe* in a permanent bond: *Contentons-nous l'un l'autre, s'assurant...*

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V	V
<p>Claire Vénus, qui erres par les cieux,            Entends ma voix qui en plaints chantera,            Tant que ta face au haut du ciel luira,            Son long travail et souci ennuyeux.            Mon œil veillant s’attendrira bien mieux,            Et plus de pleurs te voyant jettera;            Mieux mon lit mol de larmes baignera            De ses travaux voyant témoins tes yeux.            Donc des humains sont les lassés esprits            De doux repos et de sommeil épris.            J’endure mal tant que le soleil luit,            Et quand je suis quasi tout cassée            Et que me suis mise en mon lit lassée,            Crier me faut mon mal toute la nuit.</p>	<p>Bright Venus, as you wander through the spheres,            Please hear my voice, for I will plead my case            As long as heaven shows your shining face            And sing of hardship, suffering and tears.            The sting of grief will stab my tender eyes            That watch you through the night while others sleep;            I’ll drench the sheets, so constantly I’ll weep,            While you bear witness to my miseries.            The human spirit is a weary guest            That craves the blessing of a moment’s rest.            Each day I rise to fight the daily fight            And come home black and blue and all but dead            To drag myself exhausted into bed,            And there to howl in agony all night.</p>

This sonnet begins as a hymn and ends as a cry of pain. Structurally, its journey from the opening *Claire Vénus* to the final *toute la nuit* is accomplished in four stages. The first quatrain is a mission statement: the poet hopes that by singing her woes she will get the attention of the goddess / planet. In the second, Venus, no longer addressed as a potential ally, is imagined looking on impassively as the poet continues to vent her grief. In the couplet that follows, the poet defines the human condition as one of lassitude, and the goddess / planet is no longer addressed at all, though her presence is implied in the act of explanation. In the quatrain that concludes the sonnet, Venus is neither addressed nor implied as the poet describes her routine of bruising days and miserable nights. Her pledge that she would sing as long as Venus, the “evening star,” appears in the sky is forgotten as she resigns herself to everlasting misfortune (*J’endure mal tant que le soleil luit*). The futility of singing to obtain celestial intercession is perhaps hinted at in the first line in the verb that describes the planet’s motion: *errer*, to wander. In my translation, I attempt to note the disappearance of the planet and the simultaneous fading of the poet’s hopes for relief. Justified by the strong language at the end, where the poet appears *quasi tout cassée*, I raise the volume in the last line from *crier mon mal* to “howl in agony.” By emphasizing the distance traveled – from singing to a goddess to howling like an animal – I try to convey the full bleakness of the poem.

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