

Billet à Whistler (Mallarmé); Au Chat (Gwen John)

Billet à Whistler was commissioned by Alison Smart and Katharine Durran for their New French song project. They gave the first performance in July 2004, and have recorded it on Metier MSV 92100.

Mallarmé wrote this sonnet at the invitation of the artist Whistler and it was published in 1890 in Whistler's journal *The Whirlwind*. The journal was prefaced by a drawing of a ballerina.

BILLET A WHISTLER

Mallarmé

Pas les rafales à propos
De rien comme occuper la rue
Sujette au noir vol de chapeaux;
Mais une danseuse apparue

Tourbillon de mousseline ou
Fureur éparses en écumes
Que soulève par son genou
Celle même dont nos vécûmes

Pour tout, hormis lui, rebattu
Spirituelle, ivre, immobile
Foudroyer avec le tutu,
Sans se faire autrement de bile

Sinon rieur que puisse l'air
De sa jupe éventer Whistler.

Not the squalls of wind that take over the street for no reason, liable to make black hats fly off, but a dancer in a whirlwind of muslin, a passion of scattered foam as she raises her knee; she whom we lived for: spirited, wild yet still; the tutu knocking out everything hackneyed, without worrying, except to smile that the wind of her skirt might be an air to fan Whistler.

AU CHAT

The artist Gwen John (1876-1939) wrote this poem in 1907 when her cat disappeared in the forest at St Cloud. My setting was written in France in September 2002 and is dedicated to Charlotte and David Evans, who lent us their house in Bedous.

Oh mon petit chat
Sauvage dans le bois
As tu donc oublié
Ta vie d'autrefois

Peut-être que tu es
Fâché avec moi
Mais j'ai tâché de comprendre
Tout ton petit coeur

Je me sentais jamais
Ton supèrieure
Petit âme mystèrieuse
Dans le corps du chat

J'ai eu tant de chagrin
De ne pas te voir
Que j'ai pensée de m'en aller
Dans le pays de morts

Oh my little cat, wild in the woods, have you forgotten your former life? Perhaps you are angry with me, but I tried to understand your heart. I never felt myself superior to you, mysterious spirit in a cat's body. I've been so sad not to see you that I thought I should die; but I shall be here if you come back one day, because I've been comforted by the god of Love.
(the last line refers to Rodin, to whom she gave the poem).