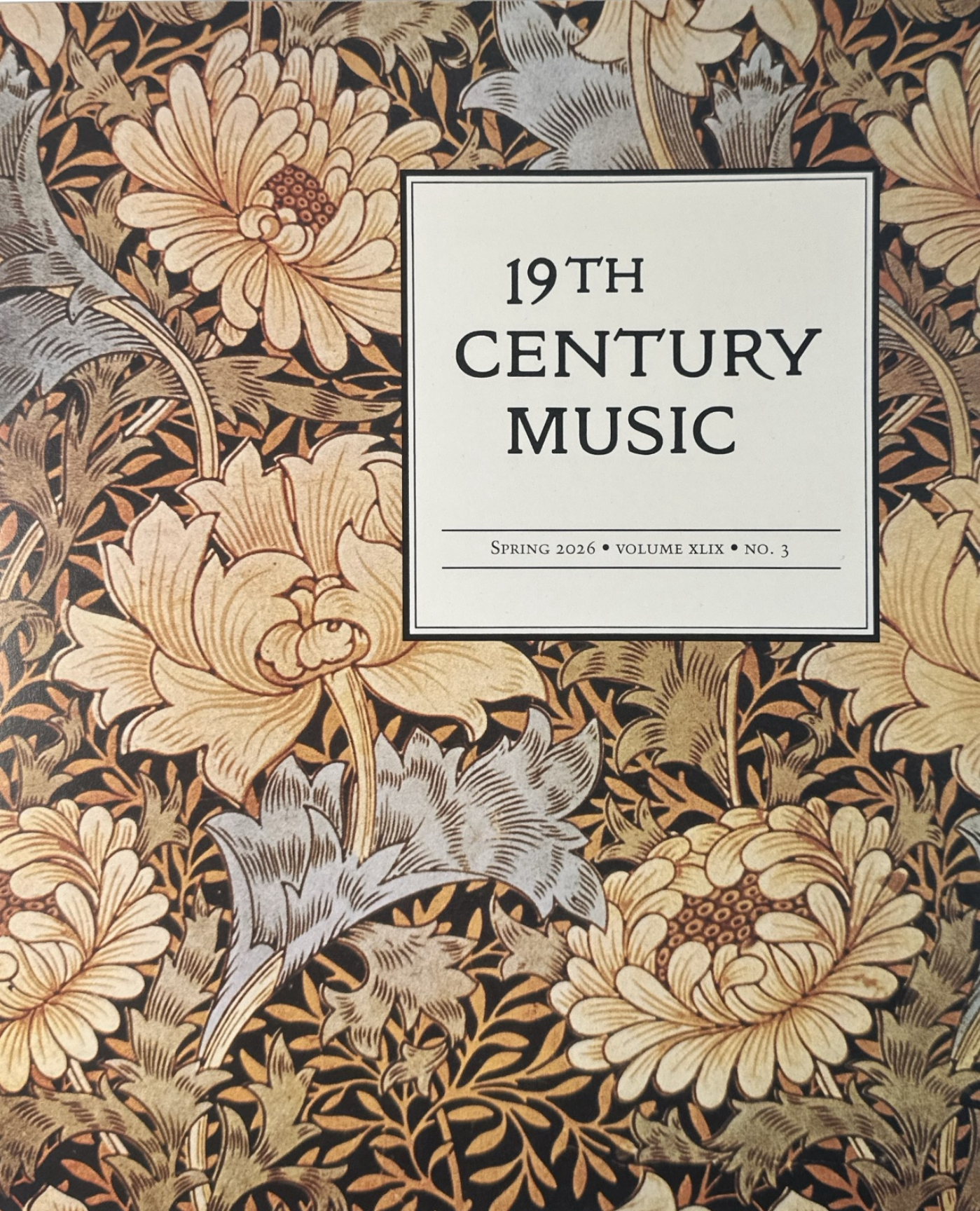

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Object Lesson: Mel Bonis's Hand

BERTHOLD HOECKNER

I have four objects and one lesson. First, some context.[1]

In the summer of 2025, I drive to Orgeval, a charming commune located some twenty kilometers west of Paris, known for its historical fruit-growing past and notable for its eleventh-century Romanesque Church. I am to meet Christine Géliot, heir to the *Nachlass* of her great-grandmother, the still little-known composer Mélanie Hélène Bonis (1858–1937) who published her works under the gender-ambiguous name "Mel Bonis." A psychologist and pianist, Géliot has been a central force in the artistic discovery and scholarly exploration of Bonis's oeuvre which comprises over three hundred compositions, including many works for piano, songs, chamber music as well as choral and organ music and a few pieces for orchestra. Géliot's book *Mel Bonis: Femme et Compositeur* interweaves discussions of the music with biographical vignettes; she also contributed to a 2020 volume that combines a catalogue of Bonis's works with chapters about various genres, her musical education, and the challenges faced by a female composer whose aspirations ran counter to the social conventions of the Third Republic.[2]

[1]I am immensely grateful to Christine Géliot for responding to numerous queries and for providing access to her great-grandmother's manuscripts as well as the objects discussed in this article. These are reproduced with permission of the Association Mel Bonis. Special thanks to Jérôme Quinet for photographs of the *moulage*; to Eva Hoeckner for photographs of the *porte-aiguille* and the *éventail*; and to Samantha Heinle, Jennifer Ronyak, and John Lawrence for comments on earlier versions of this article.

[2]Christine Géliot, *Mel Bonis: Femme et Compositeur (1858–1937)*, 2nd edn. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009); Étienne Jardin, *Mel Bonis (1858–1937): Parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle Époque* (Arles: [Venice]: Actes Sud, 2020). Géliot also helped to set in motion the digitization of materials from her archive, which is now available on a website by the Association Mel Bonis https://www.mel-bonis.com/FR/Accueil/ (accessed on 1 December 2025). See also the

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Who is Mel Bonis? Born into a modest religious Parisian family, the young Mélanie teaches herself the piano before her reluctant parents agree to formal training. At age sixteen, she is introduced to César Franck, who recognizes her talent and, in 1877, facilitates her entry into the Paris Conservatoire where she studies alongside Claude Debussy and Gabriel Pierné. Bonis's formidable abilities secure her the rare admission to the preparatory course for the prestigious Prix de Rome, still reserved for men at the time, but her parents deny her this opportunity with the prospect of a career as a composer with a prominent public profile. She falls in love with a fellow student, the well-educated and cosmopolitan poet and singer Amédée Landély Hettich. Worried about the prospects of a bohemian lifestyle, her parents disapprove of the relationship and withdraw their daughter from the Conservatoire. In 1883, Bonis enters into an arranged marriage with Albert Domange, a *nouveau-riche* businessman and two-time widower twenty-two years her senior. Albert has no interest in music and Bonis's creative output almost entirely ceases. Resentfully obedient, she fulfills the expectations that come with the social ascent and deftly manages their large affluent household, raising eight children (five boys from Domange's previous marriages and three of her own).

In the 1890s, Bonis reconnects with Hettich, who is now teaching voice and building a career as critic writing articles for Leduc's magazine *l'Art musical*. She is torn between the life of a pious, socially conservative Madame Domange and the emotional and professional intimacy with Hettich. Their secret affair results in a daughter, Madeleine (born in 1899), who is raised by foster parents and later attends a boarding school, with her true mother and father taking on the role of godparents. Hettich encourages Bonis to resume composing and to publish her music. Her output initially leans heavily toward the piano, chamber music, and songs (including settings of Hettich's poetry) as well as collections of piano pieces for children that skillfully deploy programmatic content for pedagogical purposes. Bonis submits her work to competitions, winning first prize for *Les Gitanos* by the journal *Piano Soleil* in 1891. In 1899, the Société de Compositeurs recognizes Bonis's *Suite orientale* for piano, flute, and cello. In 1909, the German journal *Signale für die musikalische Welt* awards her a fifth prize for the piano piece *Omphale*, selected out of 847 submissions (Federico Busoni is one of the judges). In 1910, Bonis becomes the first woman to be elected as secretary of the Société.

Albert dies in 1918 and after the end of World War I Bonis is forced to reveal her secret motherhood to Madeleine to avert her incestuous marriage to her half-brother, Édouard.[3] She continues to compose and publish. Music for organ and choral works feature prominently in her final years, as she is increasingly immersing herself in religious contemplation. Bonis dies in March 1937, less than three weeks before Hettich.

First Object: *Mélisande*

Mme. Géliot welcomes me and my wife Eva to her century-old farmhouse. It is a hot day, but the humidity is bearable. We go upstairs to what had been the farm's hayloft, now a salon-like studio doubling up as an archive. On the small stage, the luminous portrait of the young Bonis painted in 1877 by Charles-Auguste Corbineau hangs above the piano. A bronze sculpture of the composer presented in 2011 by the City of Sarcelles to the Mel Bonis Association adds to the composer's presence in the room. I had reached out to Géliot to peruse the autograph of *Mélisande*—one of the seven piano pieces Bonis created as musical portraits of legendary women.[4] Bonis dedicated *Mélisande* to the

fictionalized account by Alissa Wenz, *Le Désir dans la Cage* (Paris: Les Avrils, 2025).

[3] In 1923 Madeleine Hettich marries Pierre Quinet. She lives until 1995.

[4] *Phœbe* [op. 30], *Viviane* [op. 80], *Omphale* [op. 86], *Salomé* [op. 100], *Desdémona* [op. 101], *Mélisande* [op. 109]. Five of these—excluding *Omphale* which appeared first in *Signale*; and the later discovered *Ophélie*—were published by Leduc as *Cinq Pièces pour piano*, and a modern edition by Eberhard Mayer of all seven was published as *Femmes de légende* as *Œuvres pour piano*, vol. 1 (Kassel: Furore, 2003).

music critic Paul Locard and singled it out as her favorite piece ("mon préféré") in her handwritten catalogue.[5] Its impressionistic idiom features non-functional harmony, whole-tone and pentatonic collections, colorfully textured sonorities, and a modular syntax. Pierné praised the piece effusively in an 1898 letter to Bonis: "I have made the exquisite acquaintance of your 'Mélisande,' whose melancholy grace and joyful piano writing I greatly appreciated. I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart, and it is in all sincerity that I shall recommend this work to everyone I deem capable of performing it."[6]

Géliot opens a large antique trunk on the floor of the studio and retrieves a stack of manuscripts. The two copies of *Mélisande* are dated 1922. The second one appears to be an attempt to create a fair copy from the first, which has numerous deletions and erasures as well as changes in darker ink. It may have been used as a *Stichvorlage*, evident from its near perfect concordance with Leduc's 1925 edition (see plate 1a and 1b). The darkened corners of the paper show signs of use, likely from frequent page turns. The score has a horizontal fold, suggesting that it was carried around in a smaller bag or sent in an envelope.

Immediately apparent is the deletion of the first four measures that started the piece with three whole-tone waves (these recur an octave higher in mm. 46–48 of the final *Stretto* before cascading down to the concluding *Lento* section). Forgoing the preparatory flourish, Bonis opted to open *Mélisande* with a distinctive three-note melodic gesture (B♭4–C♭4–E♭5) above a lush arpeggiating A♭ dominant ninth that changes to a C♭ dominant seventh in the second measure. The two measures are repeated in a (Debussy-like) manner that remains characteristic for this piece.

Instead of venturing an interpretation of *Mélisande* that explores its inner kinship with Debussy's opera, I will focus on a different aspect, illustrated by the passage leading up to m. 17 (the only other crossed-out measure in this manuscript). It shows how skillfully Bonis divides the music between right and left hand to bring out gestural immediacy and enhance expression. When the melody starting in m. 14 on D♭6 makes its final ascent in m. 16, the notes D♭6–E♭6–F6 are doubled an octave lower by the left hand to boost the crescendo marked in m. 15. These three-octaved notes end on a B♭6 played only by the left hand on the downbeat of m. 17. Originally, Bonis notated that note in the upper system, marked *m.g.* (*main gauche*), but the revised measure places the B♭6 in the lower system.

Why the change? Bonis adds *croisez* above the B♭6 to verbally remind the player to strike the climactic pitch with the left hand by *crossing* over the right hand. This is best done with a sweeping gesture that allows hands with smaller spans to play the whole passage with energy while the right hand remains in position, ready for the arpeggiated B♭-minor triad played on the last and first beat of mm. 16 and 17, then cascading down from F3 with hands crossing until the left hand lands on the octave G♭1–G♭2 at the downbeat of m. 18.

Hand crossings in the following measures show similar finesse in helping the performer execute the passagework while articulating the melody. Bonis uses upward and downward stemming as well as the distribution of notes between the upper or lower staff system to allow one hand to stay steady while the other shifts. In the upper system of mm. 19 and 21, for example, the left hand crosses over to play the rising first two notes of a three-note melodic cell, marked both times with hairpin crescendo that Bonis brings out with black ink, also adding *espressivo* for the second iteration (see plate 1a). The third note of the cell returns to the right hand, thereby freeing up the left hand to cross back over and move down to the low register to play the octave on the downbeat of the next measure.

[5]See the in-depth discussion by François de Médicis, "La musique pour piano," in *Mel Bonis*, ed. Jardin, 328–33, which explores affinities with Debussy's opera and parallels to his piano music.

[6]"J'ai fait l'exquise connaissance de votre 'Mélisande' dont j'ai apprécié la grâce mélancolique et la joie écriture pianistique. Je vous félicite de tout cœur, et c'est en tout sincérité que je signalerai cette œuvre à tous ceux que je jugerai capable de l'interpréter" (15 December 1898); see Géliot, *Mel Bonis*, 109. The undated letter appeared first in the March 1947 volume *Mel Bonis Madame Albert Domange: Compositeur de musique, Biographie-œuvres. Par ses enfants et petits-enfants à l'occasion du dixième anniversaire de sa mort*.

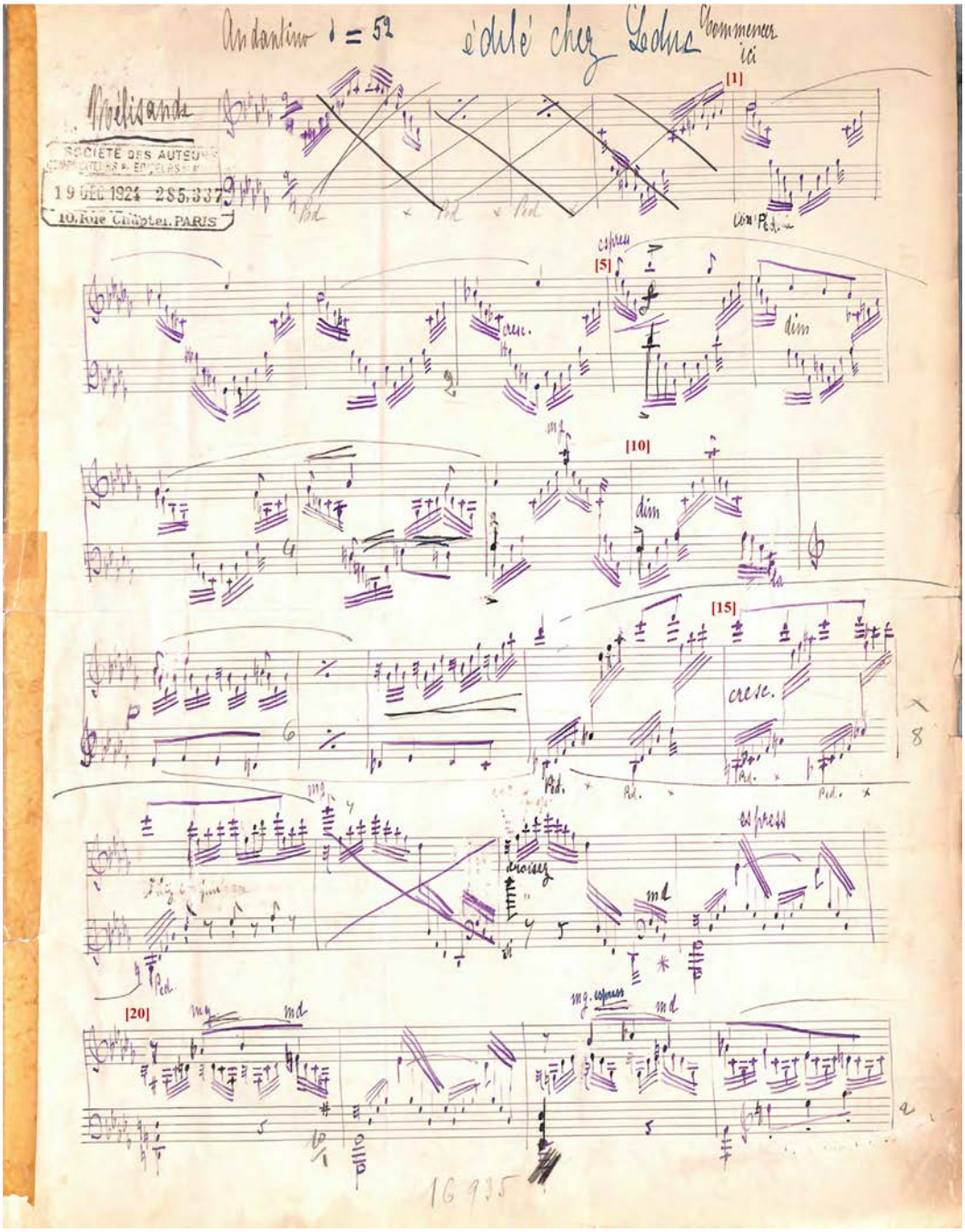

Plate 1a: *Mélisande* by Mel Bonis, first page of autograph.

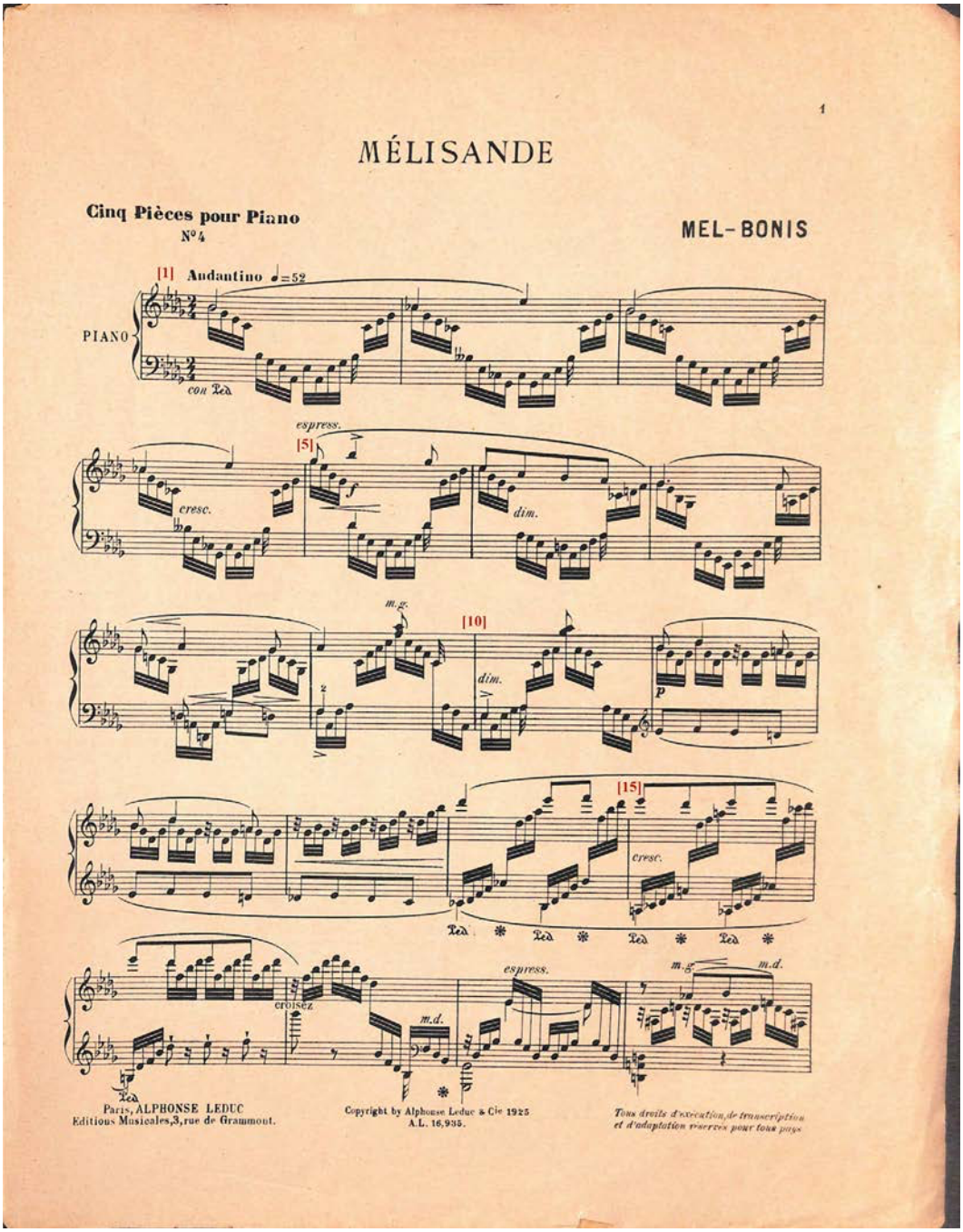

Plate 1b: *Mélisande* by Mel Bonis, first page of the 1925 edition by Leduc.

Second Object: *Moulage*

When I first studied *Mélisande* in the summer of 2021, I was struck how much Leduc's engraving facilitated playing and memorizing the music. Bonis's ergonomic crossings even inspired me to come up with my own.[7] I marveled at how Bonis—an excellent pianist and proficient sight-reader trained at the Conservatoire[8]—had created this piece with such proprioceptive acuity. Since the score of *Mélisande* sat so well under my hands, I wondered: Could it be that Bonis's hands were about the size of *mine*?

With this in mind, I ask Géliot whether a cast (*moulage*) of her great-grandmother's hand had been created during her lifetime and, if so, whether she could send me a photo, along with measurements. She responds with a quick "yes" to the first question and a bit slower to the second: "let me explore . . . with the other side of the family." After returning home, I receive an email with images of a cast made in 1887 (see plate 2) along with the measurements: twenty-three centimeters from the cutoff below the wrist to the tip of the middle finger; and fourteen centimeters from the tip of the thumb to the edge of the ulnar side of the palm. Close enough: my palm is just a little wider and the length from the wrist to the tip of the fingers a little shorter. To be sure, there are other important properties of a pianist's hand, such as the angle between thumb and index finger or the length of the thumb itself. What matters, however, is that if the overall dimensions of Bonis's hand were reproduced in the cast—this would be indicative of why the music of *Mélisande* fits my own hand so well—something I cannot say about pieces by other composers that demand reaching a tenth or more, such as some of the preludes by Rachmaninoff I have tried my hand at.[9]

Third Object: *Porte-aiguille*

My French is a bit rusty, so while I examine the autograph versions of *Mélisande*, my wife, Eva, who taught for many years at the Lycée

Plate 2: *Moulage*: Cast of Mel Bonis's right hand (1887).

[7]For example, finishing the fast wholetone-ish descent of the stretta on the downbeat of the next measure by reaching over with my right hand, so that I could hit its final C1 with utmost verve using the middle finger of my right hand instead of the pinky of my left hand.

[8]See Jacek Blaszkiewicz's article "*Déchiffreuses*" in this issue.

[9]Regarding the caveat about the accuracy of the cast, see Pauline Pocknell, "Reading Liszt's Hands: Molds, Casts and Replicas as Guides to Contemporary Creative Representations," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 54–56 (2003–05): 179–81.

Plate 3: *Porte-aiguille*: Pincushion owned by Mel Bonis.

français de Chicago, has coffee with Christine (we are now on first-name basis) to relay the rationale behind the new genre of "object lessons" for *19th-Century Music*. Might there be any other "objects" of interest in her archive that belonged to Mélanie and had been handed down on her side of the family? Christine's face lights up: "I think I have something." She goes downstairs and returns with a *porte-aiguille*, a so-called disk pincushion that looks like a tiny book with two leather covers, about the size of a credit card (see plate 3).[10] The layer of fabric between the covers into which needles are to be stuck is about four millimeters thick. A red threading covers that layer, but most of it has worn off from usage, except at the edges. The initials on the front stand for Mélanie Domange.

Christine explains. After the marriage to Albert, Bonis appears to have embraced her role and obligations as a woman of means and high social status, sparing no expenses for fashion, food, and entertainment as well as the interior design of her residences. Although repairing a tear or sewing on a button was the task of a *femme de chambre* or a nursery maid, the young Mélanie had likely been taught by her mother how to do needlework. Albert may have presented the pincushion as a gift to his young wife, but it is also possible that she might have purchased it herself for doing her own repair work. Its tangible traces of usage show that Bonis's *porte-aiguille* had been ready at hand—more than any other object discussed here.

Fourth Object: *Éventail pliant*

A while later, Christine leaves the studio once more and returns with a folding fan (*éventail pliant*, see plate 4). On its decorative side, the center features a pastoral scene which is flanked with handwriting by Léo Delibes (1836–91), who had created and juried Bonis's harmony exam at the Conservatoire. The date indicates that she appears to have approached the composer during an October 1885 performance of *Le roi l'a dit* at the *Opéra-Comique*. Delibes seems to have been so pleased to see his former student that he commemorated the occasion by writing something on the fan, possibly for a charitable cause. On the right side, he notates the first phrase of Benoit's melody

[10]See Gay Ann Rogers, *An Illustrated History of Needlework Tools* (London: J. Murray, 1983), 142–46.

Plate 4: *Éventail pliant*: Mel Bonis's folding fan with writing by Léo Delibes (1885).

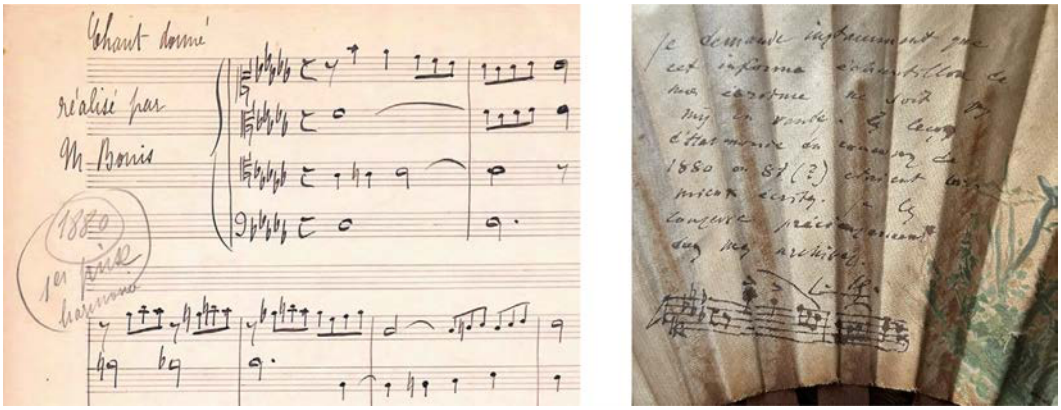

Plate 5: Opening with given subject, of Mel Bonis's first-prize-winning exam in the *Cours d'harmonie* juried by Léo Delibes, autograph (1880).

from the opera's act I "Chanson à 2 voix" ("Jacquot, running through the heather, sings to the birds: I am happy") and comments: "Too difficult to write properly on a fan! Still! It is for a good cause . . . but I advise Madame Domange-Bonis to keep it." On the left side, he notes: "I urgently request that this infamous sample of my writing not be put up for sale. The harmony lessons from the 1880 or 81(?) competition were much better written. I hold them dearly in my archives." He then adds the subject of the exam (see plate 5).

Making an effort to neatly notate two bits of music across the folds of the fan—perhaps using something to draw remarkably straight staff lines—Delibes expressed appreciation for his excellent former examinee, though he seemed quite preoccupied with the appearance of his handwriting. Though he'd spoken in jest, Bonis heeded his advice and did not put the autographed accessory up for sale. To her, it may have been not just a souvenir of a special night at the opera, but also the token of her teacher's tribute to a student who had once

won first prize in his harmony course, as noted proudly in her own hand on her copy of the exam (see plate 5). She kept both the exam and the fan.

Lesson: A Hermeneutics of the Hand

These four objects invite the musicologist to explore what may be called a hermeneutics of the hand: an approach that may foster a deeper understanding of what musicians created and experienced manually. This approach treats the hand as an organ of embodied knowledge. As such, the hand is a bridge between the mind and the material world that may facilitate the fusion of horizons between historians and the objects used by historical subjects. My primary concern is the *haptic* dimension. To that end, I will consider the above objects in pairs. The score of *Mélisande* together with the cast of Bonis's hand may allow for a deeper understanding of her pianism, which is the technical skill of playing and composing for the piano. Next to the pincushion, the autographed fan may illustrate how female accessories during the Victorian Age and Third Republic could take on a special significance for a woman composer.

To explore how a hermeneutics of the hand might pertain to these objects, it will be helpful to revisit an important distinction in historical research between a *source*, which is "intended . . . to stand as an account of events," and a *trace*, which is something "not made with the intention of revealing the past to us, but [which] simply emerged as part of normal life."[11] Thus the changes and corrections in the autograph score of *Mélisande* are intentional acts that invite musicologists to interpret the manuscript as a source that documents deliberate decisions in the compositional process—something less palpable when composing music with the help of notation software in the digital age. At the same time, the darkened edges of the score are a trace of someone turning the page while playing from the autograph. As is the case here, a document can be both source and trace: communicating the proper meaning through notation and disclosing frequent usage. While handwriting is the primary criterion for the authenticity of an autograph, traces of use on the page may have involved other actors. The writing is in Bonis's hand, but someone else may have at times assisted with turning the page.

There is one other object instrumental to this account: the piano. It is possible that Bonis created *Mélisande* without using a piano or that she composed it at the piano either by conceiving the whole piece before writing it down or doing so in stages. In either case, at some point she had to think about how the haptic experience of playing affected its *notation* and vice versa. In his book *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition*, Jonathan De Souza draws on David Kirsh's notion of a musical instrument as an "enactive landscape" which is "a set of affordances that are activated for an agent" and as such constitutes "a space of possibilities, in which technology and technique coevolve" so that instruments "provide musicians the physical landscape necessary to change their possibilities—to create a perfect niche for making music."[12]

Thus, a musical instrument turns into a *tool* through the interplay between its functional affordance and its opposite, its functional resistance.[13] While the former is manifest in the ease that comes with the proper handling of a tool for its intended purpose, the latter arises from conditions and constraints that may require not only an adjustment *of* the tool but also an adjustment *to* the tool. Hence, the interplay of functional affordances and functional resistance is not just contingent on the instrument but also on the musician.

[11] See Allan Megill, Steven Shepard, and Phillip Honenberger, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 25. I discuss a related example in my *Film, Music, Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 31–35.

[12] Jonathan De Souza, *Music at Hand: Instruments, Bodies, and Cognition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 52. David Kirsh, "Embodied Cognition and the Magical Future of Interaction Design," *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 20/1 (2013): 3. For the notion of "Resistance," see Thor Magnusson, *Sonic Writing: Technologies of Material, Symbolic, and Signal Inscriptions* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 169–70.

[13] James J. Gibson, "The Theory of Affordance," in *Perceiving, Acting and Knowing: Toward an Ecological Psychology*, ed. R. E. Shaw and John Bransford (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977), 67–82.

Historically, composer-performers who create music for themselves have been especially attuned to this interplay by seeking advantageous affordances of the instrument while reducing its resistance to their hands.[14]

When Bonis notated *Mélisande*, the size of her hands provides performers with an occasion for a *haptic* hermeneutic that can bridge the horizon of her past with the horizon of their present. Playing the piece, my hands feel something similar to what her hands felt. The somatic connection supersedes the symbolic one. This potential for embodied understanding—where materiality is meaning—prompted my query about the size of Bonis's hands to find out whether it matched mine. I was not interested in the *moulage* as a source, but as a trace; not as sculpture, but as cast. This change of perspective is akin to approaching the death mask of a famous composer like Beethoven *not* to read its physiognomy but to sense its mere physis.[15] Such a shift from fetish to the factual no longer focuses on the aesthetic representation of genius but attends to the mechanical reproduction of facial features: no longer an artifact, but a copy; no longer the mask, but a mold. With this change from mediated meaning to immediate sensation, my haptic hermeneutic of Mélanie's *moulage* was foremost a matter of measurement: the matter at hand became a matter of the hand.

I did not feel the same kind of connection with Bonis's *porte-aiguille* and her *éventail pliant*. I could relate somewhat to the former: my mother taught me how to affix buttons when I was a child, a necessity at the time (she had six sons, no daughter). Yet, that summer afternoon at Orgeval, Christine and Eva (who makes her own clothes) expressed a delight in the pincushion that showed a different access to this object. They sensed how Bonis might have carried it with her at all times, tucked in a purse for an emergency repair. I relay their delight not to essentialize gender stereotypes, but to acknowledge how a haptic hermeneutic can make the *longue durée* of gendered practices palpable. Yet there is also one detail—the initials M. D.—that propel the *porte-aiguille* into the discursive realm. As a cipher of Mélanie's marriage to Albert Domange, her initials can be read as a contract that had to be kept, but could also be broken. In any case, the pincushion both represented and embodied something for her that ensured its survival in her estate. We may never know what it meant, but may feel it with our fingers.

Finally, the fan. When Bonis attended *Le roi l'a dit* at the *Opéra-Comique* in October 1885, she had likely packed the accessory for its primary purposes which was not just to cool her face, but also to perform her femininity. As Susan Hiner has noted:

> Already overdetermined by the nineteenth century, the fan gradually assumed a commercial role, for its erotic symbolism was deeply bound up in the relationship between women and fashion in nineteenth-century France. Like so many other feminine fashion accessories, the fan could silently speak of the social virtuosity of its possessor. . . . Fans could also publicly communicate what virtuous ladies were prohibited from uttering aloud. Thus fans could remonstrate, flirt, invite, or even conceal a love letter, as we have seen. Their coupling of virtuosity and virtue enacted precisely the paradoxical status of nineteenth-century femininity. This constantly resurfacing object, in the hands of the bourgeois subject, came to mediate the developing tensions of modernity itself as both fans and women emerged as commodified objects of circulation.[16]

Delibes's somewhat *risqué* deployment of the fountain pen did more than defeat the functional resistance of the fan's folds. He also commodified and memorialized his former student. Graced with his handwriting to be auctioned off as a collectible for a charitable cause, the fan became a keepsake. Bonis may

[14]De Souza discusses many examples ranging from the deaf pianist Beethoven to harmonica player Howard Levy and jazz guitarist Pat Metheny; see *Music at Hand,* 6–27, 71–79, 101–05.

[15]See Abigail Fine, "Beethoven's Mask and the Physiognomy of Late Style," this journal 43 (2020): 143–69 and the chapter "Beethoven's Masks and the Beautiful Death" in Fine, *The Composer Embalmed: Relic Culture from Piety to Kitsch* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025), 105–36.

[16]Susan Hiner, "Fan Fetish: Gender, Nostalgia, and Commodification," *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 161–62.

have held on to it because of the coded recommendation from her former teacher who ventured a musical *double entendre*: quoting a melody from *his* opera next to his subject for *her* exam. Addressed as Madame Domange-*Bonis*, Mélanie could recall that moment in her life when a female student who won first prize in the *Cours d'Harmonie* at the Conservatoire might have dreamt about becoming a famous composer. As a souvenir, the fan coupled her virtuosity and virtue to afford such a fantasy.

In her copy of Leduc's edition of *Mélisande*, Bonis wrote on the last page: "To my little Madeleine, who understands very well Mélisande . . . the author." If *Mélisande* was indeed Bonis's favorite piece, this informal dedication gives voice to a shared affinity between mother and daughter, whose relationship was strained by the social stain of illegitimacy (plate 6).

Apparently, Madeleine took after her mother in two ways. For one, she was musical. Writing to her teenage daughter at her boarding school, Mélanie praised "the way you practice the piano." Noting that Madeleine would "eventually discover its benefits," she encouraged her to "continue with it as best as circumstances allow."[17] Madeleine also appears to have been the spitting image of her mother. In an incident at a "Saturday gathering" that became part of family lore, one of the guests expressed surprise about the likeness between Mme Domange and Madeleine: "this young girl resembles you like two drops of water . . . might it be that she is your daughter?" Reportedly, Mélanie responded: "What are you thinking, my dear friend, I am above all suspicion"—after which Madeleine left the dining room slamming the door.[18]

Biographers often struggle with doing justice to the children of their subjects. But when taking the above account at face value, I envision how the resemblance between mother and daughter extended to their hands, and how Madeleine might have run her fingers over the *moulage* handed down on her side of the family. Amid Mélanie's tender dedication of *Mélisande* to her love child, I now *grasp* how "petite Madeleine" might have played her mother's music, feeling how well it laid under *their* hands.

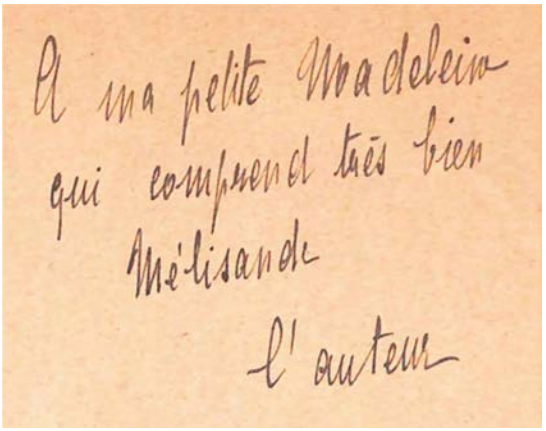

Plate 6: Mel Bonis's handwritten note on the last page of her copy of Leduc's edition of *Mélisande*.

Abstract

"Object Lesson: Mel Bonis's Hand" explores the legacy of French composer Mélanie Hélène Bonis through four specific artifacts: her autograph score of the piano piece *Mélisande*, the 1887 cast of her hand, a pincushion, and a folding fan. Proposing a "hermeneutics of the hand," the article treats the hand as an organ of embodied knowledge bridging historical subjects and modern performers. The analysis of the hand cast alongside the score reveals a somatic bond created through the proprioceptive acuity of Bonis's pianism. Domestic objects like the pincushion and fan further serve as traces of the gendered social constraints Bonis navigated in the Third Republic. Ultimately, these haptic artifacts illuminate a shared physical and musical connection between the composer and her illegitimate daughter, Madeleine.

[17]Géliot, *Mel Bonis*, 229–30.
[18]Géliot, *Mel Bonis*, 247–48.