

Malcolm Caluori

Désirée

A CANTATA

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MALCOLM CALUORI

Désirée

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for Solo Voices, Gospel Choir and Chamber Ensemble
after Kate Chopin



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ATLANTA

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Désirée **Soprano**
Madame Valmondé **Mezzo-soprano**
Armand Aubigny **Tenor**

Gospel Choir
with Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass soloists

Adaptation and text* by the composer
after the short story *Désirée's Baby* by Kate Chopin (1851-1904)

*Lullaby text excerpted from 'Lady-Baby', as it appears without music in
Plantation Songs and Other Verse, by Ruth McEnery Stuart (1916, D. Appleton & Co.)

Part I: At the Pillar

Prelude

Orchestra

No.1 Plantation Song (Chorus)

Choir

No.2 The Idol of Valmondé (Recitative with Chorus)

Désirée, Mme. Valmondé, Bass, Choir

No.3 How Could He Not (Aria, and Episode with Chorus)

Désirée, Armand, Tenor, Choir

Part II: The Visit

No.4 L'Abri (Recitative, and Arioso with Chorus)

Mme. Valmondé, Choir

No.5 Désirée's Baby (Chorus and Episode)

Désirée, Mme. Valmondé, Choir

No.6 Oh, Armand, my Armand (Aria)

Désirée

Part III: Discovery

No.7 A Disquieting Air (Arioso)

Désirée

No.8 The Quadroon Boy (Recitative)

Désirée

No.9 Armand! Look at our child (Episode)

Désirée, Armand

Part IV: The Letter

No.10 When my hand could hold a pen (Recitative)

Désirée, Mme. Valmondé

No.11 Dismissal (Episode with Chorus)

Désirée, Armand, Alto, Choir

No.12 Injury (Aria)

Armand

Part V: The Leave-taking

No.13 Among the Reeds and Willows (Chorus)

Choir

No.14 Lullaby (Chorus)

Soprano, Choir

Part VI: Remnants

No.15 The Bonfire (Chorus)

Bass, Choir

No.16 The Remnant (Recitative and Duet)

Armand, Alto, Tenor

No.17 Reprise: Plantation Song (Quartet with Chorus)

Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, Choir

Instrumentation

Flute
Clarinet in B flat
Bass Clarinet

Horn I in F
Horn II in F
Trumpet in C
Trombone

Piano

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Violoncello
Bass

PART I: At the Pillar

Prelude

No.1 Plantation Song (Chorus)

CHORUS

Stand up, Brother –
All us souls, we journey together.
Who we is don't change who we always was;
De cott'n flow'r still bloom.

Lawd, we work an' sing an' laugh an' cry,
Life be short, but de day be long.
We work an' sing an' laugh an' cry,
De mas'er's stric an' de work stretch on. So –

Stand up, Brother –
All us souls, we journey together.
Who we is don't change who we always was;
De cott'n flow'r still bloom.

Lawd, we love an' lose an' live and die,
Life be short, but de day be long.
We love an' lose an' live and die,
De mas'er's stric an' de work stretch on. So –

Stand up, Brother –
All us souls, we journey together.
Who we is don't change who we always was;
De cott'n flow'r still bloom.

No.2 The Idol of Valmondé (Recitative with Chorus)

DÉSIRÉE

Désirée slept beside the big stone pillar
at the gateway of Valmondé.

BASS

Monsieur Valmondé had found the toddler there.

CHORUS

Some thought she might have strayed there on her own;
and some believed she'd been purposely left.

BASS

But in time, Madame, being childless of her flesh,
abandoned every speculation but her own.

MADAME VALMONDÉ

Désirée had been sent to me
by a beneficent Providence
to be the child of my affection.

And She grew beautiful and gentle,
affectionate and sincere –

CHORUS

The idol of Valmondé.

No.3 How Could He Not (Aria, and Episode with Chorus)

DÉSIRÉE

Désirée stood against the big stone pillar
at the gateway of Valmondé.

TENOR

When Armand Aubigny came riding by,
how could he not notice this poem for the eye,
feel struck by a pistol-shot, utter a sigh?
No, how could he not fall in love?

The wonder was that he'd not loved her before.
He had known Désirée since the time
when his father had brought him from France, at age eight,
where his mother had recently died.

To an Aubigny, love always comes like a blow.
His passion awoke in that moment's tableau,
as an avalanche gusts, or as prairie fires grow.
And how could he not fall in love?

CHORUS

Be Practical, sir;
consider things well –
How obscure her background...

ARMAND

I look into her eyes and I do not care.

CHORUS

Remember, she is nameless.

ARMAND

What does it matter about a name?
I'll give her one of Louisiana's oldest and proudest.

TENOR

He ordered the corbeille from Paris,
and contained himself with what patience he could
until it arrived;

CHORUS

Ah – And – then ...

TENOR

And then they were married.

PART II: The Visit

No.4 L'Abri (Recitative, and Arioso with Chorus)

MADAME VALMONDÉ

It seems to me just yesterday that Désirée was but a child.
It's funny now to think of her with a baby of her own.
Since our last embrace four weeks have passed,
and as it's such a pleasant day,
I've decided to drive to L'Abri for a visit.

It's a sad-looking place,
I quake each time I see it.
Such a sad-looking place,
which for many years has not known
the gentle presence of a mistress.

CHORUS

It was in France she was married to old Monsieur Aubigny,
in France she was buried by old Monsieur Aubigny,
having loved her own land too well ever to leave.

MADAME VALMONDÉ

Yes, a sad-looking place, which I shudder to see.

[*Arriving with a heavy sigh*]
Well, here we are.

CHORUS

And the new master's rule is a strict one, too.
And under it his Negroes had forgotten how to smile,
as they did in the old master's easy-going and indulgent lifetime.

[*She knocks at the door.*]

No.5 Désirée's Baby (Chorus and Episode)

CHORUS

The young mother was recovering slowly.
She lay full-length upon a couch,
in her soft white muslins and laces,
the baby asleep upon her arm.

Madame Valmondé leaned over Désirée
and tenderly held her in her arms
with a kiss upon her brow.

MADAME VALMONDÉ

[*With shock*]
This is not the baby!

DÉSIRÉE

[*Playfully*]
I knew you'd be astonished.
Oh, the way he's grown!

Look at the little piggy's legs – look mamma,
and at his hands and fingernails – real fingernails.
The nurse had to cut them this morning.

And the way he cries is deafening.
The other day Armand could hear him
as far away as La Blanche's cabin.
Oh, the way he's grown!

MADAME VALMONDÉ

Yes, the child has grown, has changed.
What does Armand say?

No.6 Oh, Armand, my Armand (Aria)

DÉSIRÉE

Oh, Armand, my Armand, the proudest father in the parish,
I believe, because it's a boy, to bear his name.
Though he says that he would've loved a girl as well –
but I know it isn't true.
I know that he's only saying that to please me.
And mamma,
[*In a whisper*]
and mamma, he hasn't punished one of them –
not one of them – since baby is born.
Oh, mamma, I'm so happy!
It frightens me.

Oh, Armand, he can be imperious and so exacting,
but marriage and the birth of our son have softened him.
That's why happiness has filled my heart so full –
I'm so desperately in love.
I tremble, when he frowns I tremble, but love him.
And when he smiles,
When he smiles, I ask no greater blessing,
I ask no greater blessing of God.

PART III: Discovery

No.7 A Disquieting Air (Arioso)

DÉSIRÉE

One day, when our son is nearly three months old,
I awake to a sense of something in the air:
a menace to my peace, too subtle yet to grasp,
a sort of disquiet, the merest suggestion
of something in the air.

Among the blacks a mysterious tone,
unexpected neighbours who suddenly call,
who can hardly account for their coming at all.
Then in Armand a bewildering change,
a change in his manner, a terrible change,
which I haven't dared question or asked to explain.

His eyes are averted oddly when he speaks.
And it seems that the love-light shines in them no more.
He absents himself from home, and avoids me and our child.
And the spirit of Satan when handling the slaves
unexpectedly takes hold.

Ah, such misery!
This is misery unto death.

No.8 The Quadroon Boy (Recitative)

DÉSIRÉE

And here I sit, in my room,
in my dressing gown,
in the thick afternoon heat,
mad with preoccupation.

This threatening mist that I feel closing in
absently fixes my eyes to the bed,
to the half naked baby that lay there asleep.
One of La Blanche's little quadroon boys –
also half naked – fans the child
slowly with a fan of peacock feathers.

I glance from my child
to the boy beside him,
and back again,
and back again,
and back again. – Ah!

No.9 Armand! Look at our child (Episode)

DÉSIRÉE

Armand!
Armand,
Armand,
Look at our child.
What does it mean?
Tell me.

[*Despairing*]
Tell me, what does it mean!

ARMAND

[*Lightly*]
It means that the child is not white.
It means that you are not white.

DÉSIRÉE
It is a lie;
it is not true,
I am white!
Look at my hair,
it hangs brown about my shoulders;
and my eyes are grey,
Armand, you know they are grey.
Don't go!
And my skin is fair.
Wait!
Look at my hand;
whiter than yours, Armand.
[*Laughing hysterically*]

ARMAND
As white as La Blanche's

DÉSIRÉE
Don't go!

PART IV: The Letter

No.10 When my hand could hold a pen (Recitative)

DÉSIRÉE
When my hand could hold a pen,
I wrote, despairing, to mamma.

My mother,
They tell me that I am not white.
Armand has said I am not white.
For God's sake tell them it's not true!
It's not true!
It's not true...
You must know that it's not true.

I shall die.
I must die.
I cannot be so unhappy, and live.

MADAME VALMONDÉ
'My own Désirée:
Come home to Valmondé;
Come back to your mother who loves you.
Come with your child.'

No.11 Dismissal (Episode with Chorus)

ALTO
When the letter reached Désirée,
she took it to her husband's study,
and laid it open upon the desk before him.

She was a stone image:
silent, white, still.

CHORUS
He ran his eyes coolly over the words.

ALTO
He said nothing.

DÉSIRÉE
Shall I go, Armand?

ARMAND
Yes, go.

DÉSIRÉE
Do you want me to go?

ARMAND
Yes, I want you to go.

CHORUS
She turned away stunned,
and walked toward the door,
slowly...
slowly...

ALTO
Hoping he would call her back.

CHORUS
Slowly,
slowly,
step by step...

DÉSIRÉE
Goodbye, Armand.

ALTO
He did not answer.

No.12 Injury (Aria)

ARMAND
Almighty God has cruelly and unjustly dealt with me.
[*Snearing*]
Wife! My wife!
By stabbing thus into her soul,
I might somehow pay Him back in kind.
Moreover, I no longer love her.

I know she grieves this devastated love,
for I too grieve desires deceived by Fate.
But this Désirée is not the girl to whom I pledged my heart.
The grave burden of this mark is hers alone to contemplate.

No matter how unconscious the infliction she has wrought,
My wife! My wife!
She has brought injury upon my home,
injury upon my name,
injury upon my line!

How could I love ...that – at all?

PART V: The Leave-taking

No.13 Among the Reeds and Willows (Chorus)

CHORUS
The nurse was pacing with the child when Désirée came looking.
And in the somber gallery, out from her arms she took him.
The steps she then descended, and no explanation spoke.
She simply walked away beneath the branches of the oaks.

Out in the quiet fields,
'neath the sinking Autumn sun,
afternoon's October sun,
the Negroes pickin' cott'n.

She had not changed the thin white garment that she wore.
Her hair was left uncovered, as it had been left the hour before.
And from its silken mesh, and from the gown about her, like a dream,
the shining rays of sunlight brought a golden gleam.

She did not take the broad and beaten road on this occasion,
which led back to her far-off home, the Valmondé plantation.
Instead she crossed a fallow field, so delicately dressed,
where the stubble bruised her tender feet, and tore her gown to shreds.

Among the reeds and willows
growing thick along the bayou,
at the banks of the bayou,
the deep, sluggish bayou,
Among the reeds and willows
she disappeared and she did not come back again.

No.14 Lullaby (Chorus)

SOPRANO

Go to sleep, my lady-baby, please, ma'am.
Dream about de purty t'ings,
Silky frocks an' finger-rings,
Fit to dazzle queens an' kings;
Take yo' pick, my purty little lady-baby, please ma'am.

CHORUS

Don't be 'fraidy, baby,
Mammy's little lady-baby –
Bye – oh, bye – oh, bye.

SOPRANO

Go to sleep, my lady-baby, please, ma'am.
Angels waits to fly wid you
All de heavenly dream-lan' th'ough –
Twix' de stars an' up de blue –
Sail away, my lily-one, my lady-baby, please, ma'am.

CHORUS

Don't be 'fraidy, baby,
Mammy's little lady-baby –
Bye – oh, bye – oh, bye.

PART VI: Remnants

No.15 The Bonfire (Chorus)

BASS

Some weeks later at L'Abri,
there was enacted a curious scene.

CHORUS

Laces,
embroideries;
a rich array of bonnets and gloves;
the bride's corbeille of gifts
the bride's corbeille of gifts had been
the bride's corbeille of gifts had been of rarest quality.

BASS

The backyard smoothly swept, a great bonfire at its centre.
Armand Aubigny sat in the wide hallway
that commanded a view of the spectacle.

CHORUS

A priceless layette for the newborn,
A graceful cradle of willow,
with all its dainty furbishings
with all its dainty furbishings
with all its dainty furbishings was laid upon the pyre.

BASS

And it was Armand who dealt out to a half-dozen Negroes
the fuel which kept this fire ablaze.

CHORUS

Silk gowns,
and velvet gowns,
and satin gowns added to these;
the bride's corbeille of gifts
the bride's corbeille of gifts had been
the bride's corbeille of gifts had been of rarest quality.

No.16 The Remnant (Recitative and Duet)

TENOR

The last thing to go was a tiny bundle of letters;
innocent little scribbblings that Désirée had sent
in the days of their espousal.

ARMAND

Here, here is a remnant,
a portion of one from the back of the drawer.
But wait, this one isn't Désirée's...
To my father, it's signed by my mother before she died.

[Reading]

...And I thank God for the blessing of your love.

ALTO and ARMAND

But above all, night and day,
I thank the good God for having so arranged our lives
that our dear Armand will never know...

ALTO (alone)

...that his mother, who adores him,
is a woman who, among the Lord's humanity,
is accursed with the humbling brand,
the humbling brand of slavery.

No.17 Reprise: Plantation Song (Quartet with Chorus)

QUARTET (SATB)

Stand up, Brother –
All us souls, we journey together.
Who we is don't change who we always was;
De cott'n flow'r still bloom.

CHORUS

Lawd, we love an' lose an' live and die,
Life be short, but de day be long.
We love an' lose an' live and die,
De mas'er's stric an' de work stretch on. So –

Stand up, Brother –

All us souls, we journey together.
Who we is don't change who we always was;
De cott'n flow'r still bloom.