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Features:

Rudolf Barshai: A Violist and
His Arrangements

The Loeffler-Verlaine Connection

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by Ruben Balboa III

Introduction

Charles Martin Loeffler had a long and successful career as a concertmaster, soloist, chamber musician, teacher, and composer. After he retired from the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1903, Loeffler devoted himself more exclusively to composing. As violists, we are most familiar with his *Two Rhapsodies for Oboe, Viola & Piano*; however, there are nine Loeffler compositions written for the combination of viola, voice, and piano, and of those nine, only four were published in his lifetime. In 1988, the remaining five viola, voice, and piano chamber works were published posthumously by musicologist Ellen Knight as part of a collection of chamber works written for voice and various instrumental accompaniment.¹ Throughout his career, Loeffler was often inspired by the works of Decadent and Symbolist poets, and he especially admired the poetry of Paul Verlaine, transforming seven of Verlaine's poems into musical compositions for the combination of viola, voice, and piano. Decadent and Symbolist poetry explored themes of longing, despair, intoxication, and the macabre, which Loeffler paired with imaginative extended techniques and thoughtful word painting. The themes explored in these poetic works, in tandem with the parallels that are easily drawn between Loeffler and Verlaine's personal lives, inform their compositional style and make them a perfect pairing for this chamber voicing. A careful examination of the seven Loeffler/Verlaine chamber works written for viola, voice, and piano makes the case for their inclusion in the standard viola repertoire.

The Inspiration

French poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), in collaboration with Stéphane Mallarmé and Charles Baudelaire, created the Decadent movement in literature.² In poetry, Decadence served as a transitional period between the former Romantic and the future Modernist movements, often favoring pleasure and fantasy over cultural ideals, morality, and propriety. Baudelaire was the first to coin

the term "Decadence" in his volume of poetry, "Les Fleurs du mal" or "Flowers of Evil (1857)," a collection which would serve as a blueprint of Decadent themes and form for future Decadent poets.³ Baudelaire and those who followed in his footsteps, like Verlaine, often invoked images of mysticism, eroticism, and the macabre in their works. Decadence was a short-lived era in poetry, as it served mostly to make way for the Symbolist movement. Symbolists, like Decadents, rejected the more conservative ideological trends which came before them in favor of more explicit and vivid themes. What distinguished the Symbolists from Decadents was the way they expressed these themes: Decadence was more overt with its choice of words and descriptions, as opposed to Symbolism which relied on allegory and imagery to illustrate an overall atmosphere of possibility. This atmosphere, made up of descriptive and imaginative illustrations of one's fantasies, dreams, and spirituality, allowed readers to determine the interpretation of the poetry. Verlaine exemplified both these movements in his writing.

Many composers, like Debussy, Poulenc, and Fauré, were inspired by Verlaine's poetry, not only because of its poetic themes, but also because of its highly sonic and rhythmic qualities suggestive of music. In his writing, Verlaine believed above all else that poetry was meant to be musical:

Music first and foremost, and forever!
Let your verse be what goes soaring, sighing,
Set free, fleeing from the soul gone flying
Off to other skies and loves, wherever.⁴

He emulated musical form through regular rhyme schemes, lyricism, rhythmic verse patterns, and alliteration—elements which all transferred seamlessly to musical composition. Some Symbolist poets of the time, like Baudelaire, delved so deeply into this new movement that they often abandoned traditional poetic structures for the novel *vers libre*, or "free verse," style.⁵ Loeffler,

like his contemporaries, must have been drawn to the musicality of Verlaine's poetry to have set so many of his musical works to his texts.

Loeffler's early works were impacted by his deep depression after his father was imprisoned in the fortress at Ehrenbreitstein and subsequently suffered a stroke, passing away while serving his prison sentence. These events caused much distress for Loeffler and his family, forever changing Loeffler's view on life, even to the point of his contemplating suicide.⁶ These two artists were so similar that at one point, Loeffler was even referred to as "the blond musical Verlaine of Boston."⁷ It is worth noting that Verlaine had a tumultuous private life, which included a romantic affair, a prison sentence, alcoholism, and being a closeted homosexual. His life was filled with tragedies and perhaps some of these features resonated with Loeffler.

In 1893, Loeffler was reacquainted with Verlaine's poetry when he was presented with a collection of poems by Isabella Stewart Gardner, a prominent patron of the arts living in Boston. Being a perfectionist, Loeffler had some doubts about five of his viola songs as he wrote to Gardner in 1894: "They are entirely yours only some day if convenient to you I should like to have a copy to – perhaps burn in case of course I should replace the compositions with some better ones to you."⁸ The first public performance of the viola songs, "Harmonie du soir," "Dansons la gigue!," "La cloche fêlée," and "Sérénade" was given by Loeffler (viola), Lena Little (mezzo-soprano), and Maria Burger (piano) in Boston on November 30, 1897.⁹ Loeffler eventually deemed four of his works for viola,

voice, and piano worthy of public consumption, as he published his *Quatre poèmes*, op. 5, in 1904.

Quatre poèmes, op. 5

Quatre poèmes, op. 5, "Dansons la gigue!" *Romances sans paroles* (Songs without words), the book of poetry in which "Dansons la gigue!" is found, was penned and published by Verlaine in 1874 while he was serving a two-year prison sentence after being arrested for shooting his lover, fellow poet Arthur Rimbaud, during a heated argument.¹⁰ These poems were inspired by the time these lovers spent together in Belgium and the book was meant to be dedicated to Rimbaud. However, the dedication was rejected by the publisher due to the overt homoerotic implications.

Loeffler's "Dansons la gigue!" was dedicated to an artist friend, Howard G. Cushing, whom he had met at The Tavern Club. This Tavern Club was visited by many musicians, artists, and writers who would play billiards, eat, drink, and be merry after the symphonic concerts.¹¹ Loeffler frequented this tavern as both a patron and as an entertainer. While listening to this spirited work, it is easy to imagine a bar full of patrons and friends gathering, drinking, and commiserating about lost love.

In the poem, the singer laments his loss of a former lover. He recounts how this woman was beautiful and fiery in temper, and even though she was toxic to him, he will never love anyone like her. The musical work opens with an energetic, virtuosic viola solo in an *allegro non troppo* tempo, set as a gigue.

The image shows the first five measures of the musical score for "Dansons la gigue!". It consists of three staves: Viola, Soprano, and Piano. The tempo is marked "Allegro non troppo". The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Viola part starts with a triplet of eighth notes, marked with a forte dynamic (f) and the instruction "(bien rythme)". The Soprano part is silent. The Piano part provides harmonic support with chords and a piano dynamic (p) in the second measure, and a pianissimo dynamic (pp) in the fifth measure. Pedal markings (Ped.) are present at the end of the first and third measures.

Figure 1: "Dansons la gigue!," mm. 1-5.

Throughout this *gigue*, there are multiple quick tempo changes as the singer recounts the tumultuous nature of his past relationship. In the second stanza, Loeffler shifts moods completely with an indication of *poco più tranquillo* to represent the charming ways the singer's ex-lover could "desolate a lover's mind." The viola suddenly returns to its opening solo, but this time it is heard in a new key indicating a change in perception. After the interjection of the viola, Loeffler repeats the calm reminiscent quality from before. The piano part is then marked *con frenesia* (with frenzy) and *de plus en plus animé* (more and more animated) with a *poco accelerando*, suggesting an intensifying spiral, spinning the piece and the narrator more and more out of control as the intoxication takes over completely. The piece ends with one more return of the dance tune played by the viola. *Quatre poèmes, op. 5, "Le son du cor s'afflige vers le bois"*

"*Le son du cor s'afflige vers le bois*" (The sound of the horn wails towards the woods) is from Verlaine's collection of poems *Sagesse* (Wisdom) that were written between 1873-1878 and published in 1880.¹² After Verlaine was released from prison, he returned to his wife hoping to reconcile his marriage, only to be presented with divorce

paperwork. He then attempted to return to Rimbaud who violently rejected him. Thus, he eventually found himself alone and isolated. He grew very introspective and returned to his Roman Catholic religion, attempting to cope with the emotional turbulence he had endured. This seclusion and introspection are reflected in his writing, as he returned to more atmospheric and symbolic poetry.

Verlaine's poem is an allegoric illustration of the isolation one experiences in the autumn of his life. The poetry exemplifies this by painting a stark, lonely evening which falls into night and Loeffler uses these images to create his most atmospheric and impressionistic viola song. This sad and muted scene is established by the piano's use of soft pedal, a muted viola, and the vocal line at "half voice." The piece begins with a dark piano part that represents the horn heard calling in the poem, whose voice is grieving like that of an orphan child. As the voice enters, it sings a reverent tune resembling a Gregorian chant. Following this, the piano has a substantial solo marked *con fantasia*. This solo recalls the style of Debussy with its wide spanning flourishes and harmonic parallelisms. It is evident that the piano is portraying the "fierce North wind" at this point in the piece.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Le son du cor s'afflige vers le bois" from the collection "Quatre poèmes, op. 5". The score is arranged in two systems, each featuring a vocal line (soprano clef) and a piano accompaniment (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line is marked "bois." and "con fantasia". The piano accompaniment is marked "pp" (pianissimo) and "una corda". The score includes various performance instructions such as "rall." (rallentando) and "senza rall." (senza rallentando). The music is written in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 3/4 time signature. The score shows a complex melodic line for the piano with wide intervals and a vocal line that is more melodic and expressive.

Figure 2: "Le son du cor s'afflige vers le bois," mm. 8-9.

Once again, the piano serves as atmospheric texture in m. 21. The piano depicts the line, “The snow falls in long strips of lint,” by playing delicate eighth notes within a *piano* dynamic with staccato markings, illustrating the snow falling. After the pinnacle of the piece, the viola and piano help slow the momentum as they become less and less active just like the “setting sun.” Peacefully the piece closes, almost as if falling into a deep sleep.

Quatre poèmes, op. 5, “Sérénade”

“Sérénade” is from *Poèmes saturniens* (1866) under the heading *Autres poèmes* (Other poems). Verlaine describes a man trying to win the heart of a woman, but he is having trouble convincing her. He pleads with the woman asking her to listen to the song he is singing, rough and out of tune, while he accompanies himself on the mandolin. Loeffler is incredibly creative with texture and character throughout this piece, as he utilizes extended techniques in the viola and voice. The viola begins, accompanied by the piano, with pizzicato imitating the narrator’s mandolin.



Figure 3: “Sérénade,” mm. 1-4.

The narrator seems almost otherworldly, with an eerie quality written into both the whispering of the voice, which is marked “half voice” and the viola employing the use of *ponticello*. Furthermore, Loeffler expands this shrill

quality by having the viola pluck the strings near the bridge (“*près du chevalet*”). Now the viola not only sounds like a mandolin, but something perhaps more sinister.



Figure 4: “Sérénade,” mm. 13-20.

In m. 45, Loeffler repeats the text from the beginning which indicates the narrator is imitating the voice of a dead body, represented by the icy quality of *ponticello*. On the last word, the singer is indicated to use *portamento* to exaggerate the text in this moment.

Works Not Published in op. 5

La chanson des Ingénues

This charming, lyrical work, also based on a poem from

Poèmes saturniens, utilizes simplicity to illustrate the youth mentioned in the poem's title. Set in an *allegretto comodo tempo*, the piano gracefully begins with arpeggiated patterns in G major. This amable line sets up a simple mood at the outset of the piece; however, Loeffler foreshadows in the piano line that the true intentions of this work are not so innocent by adding *aimablement hypocritique* ("kindly hypocritical") above the music.



Figure 5: "La chanson des Ingénues," mm. 1-3.

After a few measures, the voice starts with the melody and the violist responds three beats later. Again, Loeffler illustrates the idea of innocence by writing a canon at the octave between these two voices. The melody stays relatively the same throughout the work except for some brief ornamentation (grace notes and trills) in the viola part. The upbeat to m. 30 introduces a theme on the piano that is then passed on to the voice and viola. Even with three voices playing the melody, the texture remains buoyant because of the restricted tessitura of the instruments and simplistic writing of the piano.

As the text becomes more sexually suggestive, Loeffler uses this opportunity to increase his use of word painting. In m. 67, the lyrics "Our hearts beat beneath our mantles," indicate that the young girls are aware of the men ogling them and the idea excites them. At that moment, Loeffler places importance on the word "*Battre*" by having the voice part hold out a note for 13 beats while underneath, their heartbeats are represented in the left-hand of the piano part with constant eighth notes. This illustration of corrupted innocence is a model example of the Decadent poetic style Verlaine is known for creating.

Viola

Soprano

Piano

ces ra-seurs de mu - rail - le, Bien que par - fois nous sen - tions Bat -

tre nos coeurs sous non

p *cresc.*

Figure 6: “La chanson des Ingénues,” mm. 64-72.

Decadent poetry also often hinted at the macabre, to which Loeffler regularly alluded in his work by use of the Dies Irae motif. The Dies Irae is an important, recurrent compositional element found in Loeffler’s writing for over a decade. He often enhanced the dark and melancholic subject matter of the poetry he chose by using this motif, which appears in many of his works and in several of the songs with viola. Treatment of this

motif differed with the context of the piece—sometimes in the forefront of the music, while at other times, hidden. In this piece, we hear the Dies Irae in m. 80, but unexpectedly in a major key. The piece ends with the viola playing a harmonic, which signifies the young girls’ purity, although ironically so.

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Viola, Soprano, and Piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The Soprano part has the lyrics "tes - Fu-tu - res des li-ber - tins". The Piano part has a complex texture with arpeggiated chords and a "sempre dim." marking. Red boxes highlight specific passages in the Piano part.

Figure 7: “La chanson des Ingénues,” mm. 78-87.

La lune blanche

“La lune blanche” is one of twenty-one poems in Verlaine’s 1870 volume entitled *La bonne chanson* (The Good Song), which he dedicated to his wife, Mathilde Mauté de Fleurville.¹³ After their first meeting, they fell in love and married in 1870. This blissful time served as a moment of clarity for Verlaine, as he would soon turn to alcoholism to help cope with the reality of being a closeted homosexual.

In this poem, Verlaine beautifully describes a moment in time, (“the exquisite hour”), which demonstrates his mastery of creating atmosphere. Set in the evening, Verlaine paints a picture of the shimmering moon, which Loeffler reflects in his composition with thin textures in all the instruments and a muted viola. The piece opens in E major with the viola playing sweeping sixteenth notes under long slurs, portraying a light wind in the still of the night.

Figure 8: “La lune blanche,” mm. 1-3.

The viola primarily serves to create texture and character, with only a few bars of melodic material in the entire work. The melody resides mainly in the vocal line,

which is a simple, yet energetic line mostly scalar motion throughout. In m. 33, the viola unravels a downward, cascading chromatic scale to signify the sweeping wind.

Figure 9: “La lune blanche,” mm. 33-35.

When approaching the text “Let us dream, it is the hour,” Loeffler uses a *rallentando* to create a sleeping or dreamlike feeling. At this moment, the viola joins the voice with the melody, implying these two lovers are resting peacefully together in their dreaming. Like “La chanson des Ingénues,” the viola ends the piece with a harmonic, this time, however, evoking peace and tranquility.

in a “Hungarian way.” These folkloric melodies are likely inspired by his early childhood memories of the Hungarian gypsy music he heard performed in the town squares when he was growing up. The piece changes character throughout and feels quite free with the use of various tempo changes. The piano serves mostly as an accompaniment with a few episodes of melodic material; however, there are two moments where Loeffler indicates the piano should resemble a harpsichord.

Rêverie en sourdine

This poem comes from Verlaine’s *Fêtes Galantes* (Gallant Parties) of 1869, a collection of poetry based on the characters of the *commedia dell’arte*.¹⁴ Loeffler creates a very specific character from the beginning by including seconds and a highly ornamented, rhapsodic viola part, indicating that the music should be played

The viola part is filled with moments of double stops and quick melodic turns, which not only add to the Hungarian character of this piece, but also imitate the sound of the nightingale, mentioned at the end of the poem.

Figure 10: “Rêverie en sourdine,” mm. 16-18.

The nightingale most often represented love in literature and sings in the evening to attract a mate. The viola embodies the nightingale by using harmonics to illustrate the nightingale's song. As the viola sings through these harmonics, the piano flirtatiously reciprocates its call,

as if it is a lover calling back to the nightingale from a distance. The nightingale evidently finds his lover at the end, as the piece finally resolves from the brooding D minor to a pleasant G major.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Rêverie en sourdine" by Gabriel Loeffler, measures 52-59. The score is written for Viola and Piano. The Viola part is in the upper register, featuring a melodic line with many natural harmonics, creating a bird-like call. The Piano part is in the lower register, providing accompaniment with chords and arpeggiated figures. Dynamics include *pp*, *p*, and *dolce*. The score is in D minor and 4/4 time.

Figure 11: "Rêverie en sourdine," mm. 52-59.

Le rossignol

Along with "La chanson des Ingénues" and "Sérénade," "Le rossignol" is part of the 1866 collection, *Poèmes saturniens* (Saturnian poems). Within this volume, "La chanson des Ingénues" and "Le rossignol" appear under the heading of *Paysages tristes* (sad landscapes). This particular work is dedicated to Lillian Henschel, the wife of Boston Symphony conductor Georg Henschel. Lillian was a vocalist and likely sang this piece, as well as other Loeffler works throughout her lifetime, as she and her husband were close friends of Loeffler.

Like "Rêverie en sourdine," this piece also sings of the famed poetic nightingale. The viola once again portrays the voice of the bird with its high harmonics and turning melodies. However, the piano also has bird-related themes, especially in the beginning as it abruptly opens with brilliant, bombastic chords which represent a "screeching flock of birds in commotion." Loeffler also depicts this idea with sweeping arpeggiation figures in the piano.

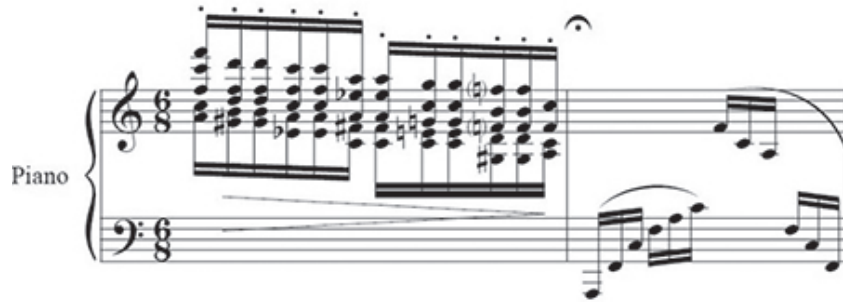


Figure 12: "Le Rossignol," mm. 1-2.

The viola is an equal partner with the voice as it has much melodic material and minimal ornamentation. Loeffler takes advantage of the viola's varied tonal palette by using *ponticello*. This technique easily encapsulates the

icy, disheartened quality that is needed for "the tree that quivers and the bird that weeps" and is heightened by his musical indication of *smorzando*.

Figure 13: "Le Rossignol," mm. 86-90.

Conclusion

Both Loeffler and Verlaine had experienced unfortunate events in their personal lives which profoundly influenced their works and consequently, the musical and literary movements of the time. The imprisonment and death of Loeffler's father transported him into a deep depression that inspired the use of the *Dies Irae* in many of his compositions while Verlaine's alcoholism and sexuality set him on a violent and tortured path. These life events impacted both of their writing styles and invoked the dark subject matter representative of the Decadent movement. Furthermore, aspects of the Symbolist movement are demonstrated by utilizing

musical elements to create atmosphere and evoke feeling. Loeffler's travels and love for Paris merged with his German musical training and influence from America to create a compositional style all on his own. Loeffler masterfully illustrates Verlaine's poetry through diverse textures and various extended technical devices for the viola such as: *ponticello*, *glissando*, *harmonics*, *pizzicato* at the bridge, and more. These imaginative works for viola, voice, and piano not only provide a unique and colorful insight into Loeffler's life and compositional style but also represent a significant addition to the chamber repertoire for the viola.

Footnotes:

- ¹ Charles Martin Loeffler, *Selected songs with chamber accompaniment*, A-R Editions, Inc., 1988.
- ² Encyclopedia Britannica, “Decadent | Literary Movement,” Accessed February 14, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Decadent>.
- ³ “Charles Baudelaire’s *Fleurs Du Mal*,” Accessed February 14, 2020. <https://fleursdumal.org/>.
- ⁴ Poetry Foundation, “Ars Poetica by Paul Verlaine,” Text/html, *Poetry Foundation*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55034/ars-poetica-56d2361d56078>.
- ⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Vers Libre | French Poetry,” Accessed April 9, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/art/vers-libre>.
- ⁶ Ellen E Knight, *Charles Martin Loeffler: A Life Apart in American Music*, University of Illinois Press, 1993. 52.
- ⁷ Knight, *Charles Martin Loeffler*, 100.
- ⁸ Knight, *Charles Martin Loeffler*, 94.
- ⁹ Loeffler, *Selected songs with chamber accompaniment*.
- ¹⁰ Foundation, “Paul Verlaine,” Text/html. *Poetry Foundation*, January 20, 2020. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/paul-verlaine>.
- ¹¹ Knight, *Charles Martin Loeffler*, 61-63.
- ¹² Encyclopedia Britannica, “Paul Verlaine | French Poet,” Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Verlaine-Paul>.
- ¹³ “La Bonne Chanson | Koninklijke Bibliotheek,” Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.kb.nl/en/themes/koopman-collection/la-bonne-chanson>.
- ¹⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica, “Paul Verlaine | French Poet,” Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Verlaine-Paul>.

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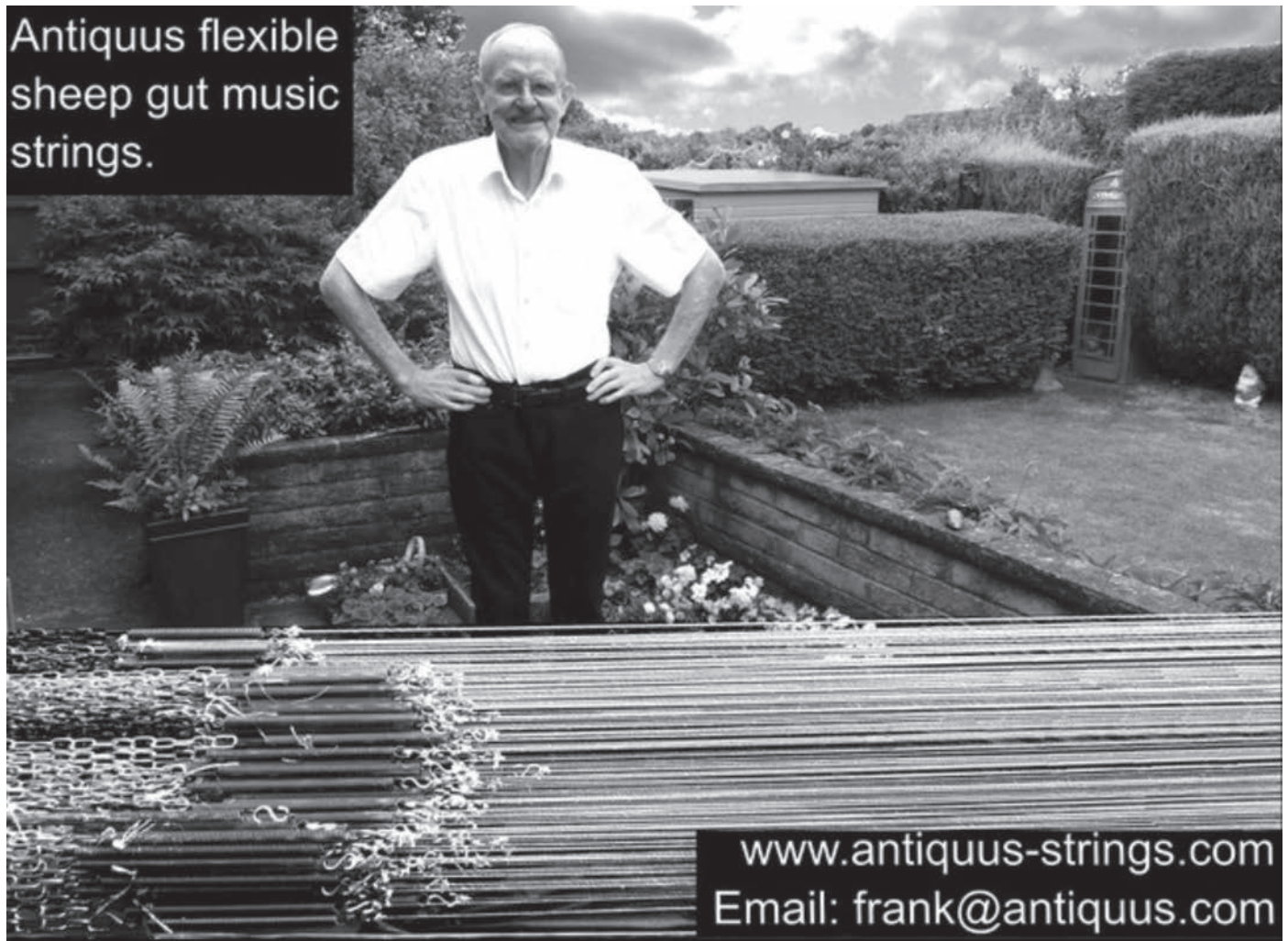
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