

“Ah, Hélas!” The Development of Wordless Vocal Music (1850–1925)

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From an examination of a significant corpus of music containing a non-textual vocal part, this paper attempts to define the thematic and musical origins of the use of this technique. Similarities in use and intent by different composers will be illuminated through a study conceived in terms of influences and affiliations. Several main themes stand out: the expression of the supernatural; the symbolist aesthetics of mystery; the evocation of sleep and death; and finally, a pantheistic vision of nature. The inarticulate voice, whose symbolism and devices are illustrated by various examples, succeeds in expressing the inexpressible in making out feelings and subjects that escape clear wording.

The national styles of the French and British produced two distinct approaches to the use of this technique. First used by Hector Berlioz, the wordless voice appears in works of Vincent d’Indy, and, of greatest importance, Claude Debussy. The impact of the third movement from Debussy’s *Nocturnes*, with wordless female chorus, can be seen in the sudden increase in the number of compositions utilizing the technique in the period that immediately followed. As Debussy’s music gained recognition in England, composers there adopted the technique, although musically, British usage seems greatly influenced by traditional folk music, including keening (*caoine*), a form of wordless lamentation.

This study ends with a comparison of the wordless voice as exemplified in selected works by Gustav Holst and Ralph Vaughan Williams.