Mel Bonis — Gai printemps (Impromptu)

What does the title mean?

- Gai printemps means “cheerful springtime.”
- The cheerful title contrasts with the music’s often melancholy character.
- Impromptu — a short piece with a free, spontaneous or improvisatory character; a genre especially associated with the Romantic period.
- First published in 1889 and later included in Cinq pièces pour piano.

Keys / Modulations

- bb. 1–43: F♯ minor
- bb. 43–55: A major
- bb. 55–71: A major → F♯ minor
- bb. 59–62: brief tonicisations of D major and B minor
- bb. 63–66: brief tonicisation of C♯ major
- bb. 71–79: F♯ minor
- bb. 79–91: A major
- bb. 91–107: A major → F♯ minor
- bb. 107–123: F♯ minor

Period and Style

- Late Romantic, with features that anticipate early twentieth-century French music; published in 1889.
- Simple triple metre and mainly homophonic texture, usually with the melody in the right hand.
- Lyrical, often melancholy character; chromatic harmony and occasional modal colouring.
- Uneven phrase lengths and decorative passages contribute to the improvisatory character.
- Frequent E ♮ gives parts of the piece an Aeolian / natural-minor quality.
- bb. 22–23: false/cross relation between E ♮ and E♯.
- bb. 60–62 and 96–98: multiple suspensions.
- bb. 59 and 61: applied chords.
- bb. 48–49: extended harmony.

Mel Bonis — Biography

Mélanie Hélène Bonis (1858–1937) was a French composer born in Paris. Largely self-taught at the piano as a child, she later entered the Paris Conservatoire, where her teachers included César Franck, Ernest Guiraud and Auguste Bazille, and her fellow students included Claude Debussy and Gabriel Pierné. She won prizes in harmony but left the Conservatoire after her family opposed her relationship with the singer and poet Amédée Hettich. In 1883 she married businessman Albert Domange, a widower with five children, and family responsibilities interrupted her musical career for a time. She returned seriously to composition in the 1890s and used the gender-neutral professional name “Mel Bonis” in the male-dominated musical profession. She composed more than 300 works and became active in the

Société des compositeurs de musique, serving as its secretary from 1910 to 1914. She continued composing into later life and died in Sarcelles in 1937, aged 79.

Genres:

- Solo piano music
- Piano duets
- Organ music
- Chamber music
- Mélodies / French art songs
- Choral and sacred music
- Orchestral music

Structure / Form

Rondo form: ABACACA + Coda

A^1 — bb. 1–20, F♯ minor

- Main theme in two related phrases.
- bb. 9–12: right-hand connecting passage.
- First phrase remains harmonically open; second reaches a perfect cadence.

B — bb. 20–35, F♯ minor

- Melody moves to the left hand in triadic writing; right hand supplies an ostinato.
- bb. 31–32: imperfect cadence.
- Ends with a connecting passage related to bb. 9–12.

A^2 — bb. 35–43, F♯ minor

- Return of A material, slightly altered.

C — bb. 43–71, A major → F♯ minor

- bb. 43–55: new material with rhythmic links to A.
- bb. 55–58: earlier C material returns more softly.
- bb. 59–62: D major and B minor briefly tonicised.
- bb. 63–66: C♯ major tonicised; ascending chromatic movement becomes prominent.
- bb. 67–71: descending passage; melody moves to the left hand and the music returns to F♯ minor.

A^3 — bb. 71–79, F♯ minor

- Return of A material at a different dynamic level.

C — bb. 79–107

- bb. 79–91: A major.
- bb. 91–107: A major → F♯ minor.

A^3 — bb. 107–115, F♯ minor

- Further return of A material.

Coda — bb. 115–123, F♯ minor

- Mainly tonic and dominant harmony.
- Ends with a strong perfect cadence.

Notation / Terms to Know

- **Gai printemps -** French: “cheerful springtime”.
- **Impromptu -** A short piece with a free, spontaneous or improvisatory character.
- **Op. 11 -** Opus 11 - the work’s opus number.
- **Allegro molto -** Very fast and lively.
- **Dotted crotchet = ca 156-172 -** The dotted crotchet beat should be approximately 156-172 beats per minute.
- **p -** Piano - soft.
- **pp -** Pianissimo - very soft.
- **f -** Forte - loud.
- **sf -** Sforzando - a sudden strong emphasis.
- **sfz -** Sforzando / sforzato - suddenly strongly accented.
- **leggero -** Lightly and delicately.
- **grazioso -** Gracefully.
- **p grazioso -** Softly and gracefully.
- **avec élégance -** French: with elegance.
- **espress. -** Espressivo - expressively.
- **marcato un poco il basso -** Emphasise or bring out the bass a little.
- **Animato -** Animated; with increased energy and liveliness.
- **Un poco animato -** A little more animated or lively.
- **a tempo -** Return to the previous or main tempo.
- **senza rall. -** Senza rallentando - without slowing down.
- **cresc. -** Crescendo - gradually become louder.
- **sempre cresc. -** Continue becoming louder.
- **Crescendo hairpin (<) -** Gradually become louder.
- **Diminuendo hairpin (>) -** Gradually become softer.
- **très lié -** French: very connected; very legato.
- **simile -** Continue in the same manner as before.
- **8va -** Play the indicated notes one octave higher than written.
- **slur -** Play the notes smoothly and connected as a phrase or gesture.
- **tie -** Join notes of the same pitch so that they sound as one sustained note.
- **accent (>) -** Give the note additional emphasis.
- **staccato -** Play short and detached.
- **tenuto line -** Hold the note for its full value, often with gentle emphasis.
- **triplet (3) -** Three notes performed in the time normally occupied by two notes of the same value.
- **pedalling brackets / lines -** The editor’s suggested sustaining-pedal changes.