

Article for “For the Record”

## SCOTTISH GROUP MEETING

11 March 2017

### French Popular Song

*France is for lyrics, England is for music*, according to Charles Aznavour. But Graham Farnell entertained the Scottish Group with a tuneful selection as he reckoned we would not understand the words! His choices did not disappoint, nor did his interwoven explanation of the colourful lives of the singers and their place in the development of the genre (French word- oops!). Nor did he neglect their political associations and the impact on their careers: whether the accolade of involvement in the resistance or condemnation as collaborators.

We started with Emile Mercadier’s 1905 version of *Le Temps des Cerises* (the cherry season) a song associated with the Paris Commune. Mercadier was a café concert singer – the *caff conk* (pardon my French) which developed into the French equivalent of the music hall.

In an offering ranging from Mistinguett’s signature tune of 1920, *Mon Homme*, to the powerful finale of Édith Piaf’s *Hymne à l’amour* (1950), I can only mention a few of the crowd-pleasers. Josephine Baker sang beautifully, albeit with a distinctive American accent, of her two loves, France and Paris, in *J’ai deux amours* (1930). Lucienne Boyer, coming straight after Mistinguett and putting her voice into the shade, impressed with an animated, passionate delivery of *Je l’aimais tant* (1927).

Graham provided the complete lyrics in French and English of the day’s most amusing song, *Tout va très bien, Madame la Marquise* (Everything’s fine, Madam). Phoning her servants to enquire about how things are going back at the chateau, the Marquise learns that there’s just been a minor incident in which her favourite mare has died. Gradually it emerges that her husband has committed suicide and the entire castle has been razed to the ground. But apart from that, all’s well. Leading French jazz musician, Ray Ventura and his *collegiens* recorded this hilarious song in 1936, intended to mock the complacency of the French government about the dangerous political developments of the time. Graham told us of a number of cover versions, including *Tout va très bien, Mussolini*, and *Tout va très bien, mon Führer*. As Brexit negotiations are clearly going to have only minor difficulties, not worth troubling the PM, perhaps it is time for *Tout va très bien, Madame Thérèse* ?

**David Bleiman**