

Program Notes

After nearly a century of big orchestral effects, from the heroic gestures of Beethoven to the bold canvases of Wagner, Gabriel Fauré brought the luminosity and subtle gradations of a water colorist to his compositions, coupling an intimate approach with evocative harmonies.

Fauré was a pivotal figure in the French school of musical thought. Just as Mendelssohn and Brahms were inspired by a rediscovery of the fugues and counterpoint of Bach, Fauré drew on early French church forms, enfolding major and minor phrases among a multiplicity of modes. Encouraged by Gustave Lefèvre at the École Niedermeyer to explore sevenths and ninths among his chords, he enriched the harmonic form and paved the way for modernism.

Camille Saint-Saëns, a long-time mentor of Fauré at the Paris Conservatoire, encouraged and promoted the younger composer, and Fauré in turn taught Ravel. Debussy and Ravel applied Fauré's harmonic theories to pentatonic and whole tone scales, creating airy triads with impressionistic coloring.

Our program celebrates this nineteenth century French lineage with a lasting gem of the choral repertoire, Fauré's Requiem, along with works by his contemporaries, Saint-Saëns, Hahn, Gounod, Massenet and others. While that century's idioms shifted from Classical through Romantic and into Impressionism, these composers were united by sophisticated harmonies and an understated approach. And many of them studied together at the Paris Conservatoire.

Fauré developed the inner voices of his choral works to reflect his harmonic subtlety, heard in this program in expressive tenor-alto duets. His careful dynamics create flowing phrases reminiscent of the French language. And in his bass line one can hear both the walking bass of modern jazz and the modal meditation of Gregorian chant.

CANTIQUE

Fauré wrote "*Cantique de Jean Racine*" (1865) as a 19-year-old student composer, winning first prize from l'Ecole de Musique Classique et Religieuse of Paris. Fauré, whose composing was already marked by his perfectionism, took extra months to complete the gentle *Cantique*, arranging it for string quartet. In this accompaniment, one can hear rhythmic triplets contrasting with the steady declamation of the sung words.

TANTUM ERGO SACRAMENTUM

Déodat de Séverac's a cappella work is serenely beautiful, and one of Séverac's best known compositions, with basses supplying a remarkable underlying supportive melody. The motet's words are taken from the final two verses of "Pange Lingua Gloriosi" by St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274).

CALMES DES NUITS and *LES FLEURS*, Op. 68, Nos. 1 and 2

In *Calme des Nuits* Camille Saint-Saëns suspends the words in phrases with astonishing moves away from the original tonal center, and with not a few chromatic chords and dissonances.

The vocal entrances on the French word "Vaste" stretch out into a long arpeggio. When all voices hold their pitches together on that first syllable of "vast" we hear a beautiful minor chord containing an extra pitch at the top, the seventh, which Saint-Saëns and Fauré used expressively for unresolved dissonance. Indeed, many of us are used to those musical chords—they have come to pervade jazz and 20th c. popular music.

In *Les Fleurs* he emphasizes the words “douleur,” and “illumine” by letting the altos, tenors, and basses drop out. The final phrase “le rire et les pleurs” is announced with insistence by the sopranos, who repeat the phrase until all voices concur. At the end, the quick rhythmic pattern slows as Saint-Saëns elongates the note values, specifying ritard with diminuendo. The composer’s most beautiful moment comes here; the final three chords resolve in a way that reminds us more of jazz than of the French Renaissance.

The poem’s essence is that laughter (“le rire”) must always keep company with tears (“les pleurs”).

MADRIGAL, Op. 35

Here Fauré alternates men and women’s duets in his use of the popular 16th c. madrigal form, elevating the rueful core of the text, Armand Sylvestre’s advice on love. His careful attention to the beginnings of phrases and flow of the poetry shapes the vocal lines against the piano accompaniment, rippling arpeggios which he cross-accentuates in the interludes to turn triple against duple.

SIX MELODIES

Le premier jour de mai—Charles Gounod wrote this celebration of the urgency of spring as part of a collection of six art songs. Jean Passerat’s 16th century text is timeless.

À *Chloris*—from Reynaldo Hahn’s *Mélodies*, Book II. One can also hear this song on one of 50 vintage recordings he made between 1920 and 1930. His songs were released on a 1998 CD, “La Belle Époque: The Songs of Reynaldo Hahn,” sung by Susan Graham and accompanied by Roger Vignoles.

Lydia—Fauré’s text, the poetry of Leconte de Lisle, is the most sensual poem on the program, and the careful setting lets the words wing nearly free from the heart.

Élégie—Massenet’s well-known song is melancholy and dreamlike. This composer of many operas, among them *Manon* and *Thaïs*, was also a prolific songwriter.

Hébé—Chausson. This poem by Louise Ackermann was set by Chausson in the Phrygian mode, to honor the Greek Goddess it describes. Wistful and evocative, Chausson finds the mysterious center of this poetry.

Sombrero—Chaminade. This is a fine example of French élan, an exuberant conclusion to these six mélodies.

REQUIEM

I. Introit

One may notice how the choral voices contrast with the orchestral bass line, which moves step-wise, downward, then changes to arpeggios. The harmony shifts into new tonal areas. The soprano entrance starts off in Bb Major, but Fauré places the Bb chord in “first inversion” – i.e., there is no Bb in the lowest part. As the choir concludes with “Luceat eis,” he returns to the original mode of D minor.

Kyrie

A tenor solo starts with the text “Requiem aeternam,” with a walking bass line supporting this beautiful melody. The “Andante” marking, of course, is the Italian word for walking, a measured pace that Fauré returns to throughout as a superb unifying technique; its presence may explain the physiological response that draws us so deeply into this music.

Next, a contrasting syncopation appears at “Exaudi.” The bass returns, interrupted by a powerful “Christe.” Slow upward gestures turn to soft downward ones, extending slow phrases into a meditation.

At the Kyrie’s ending section, voices drop out, making way for a new chromatic melody in the orchestra played over a low drone. Fauré layers his previous material—walking bass, dotted rhythms, chromatic movements, as the choir sings barely-moving pitches on “eleison.”

II. Offertory

A short motif in the orchestra informs us of the primary theme which alto and tenor sing in duet, “O Domine...” Underneath is an interesting, chromatic descending bass line. By the time the tenor starts “Hostias...” we have heard several new harmonic and rhythmic ideas, one of which will become a prominent accompaniment to this tenor solo (which is marked “Andante”). The accompaniment suggests groups of two chords linked together, in an accordion-like harmonic pattern.

Fauré recapitulates “O Domine,” expanding the choral duet to four parts with neatly layered entrances. On the text “Ne cadant in obscurum” Fauré brings in agitated rhythms in both the vocal and orchestral writing. This tense section makes way for one of the most heavenly and memorable passages, the “Amen.” Fauré transports us with original harmony, rhythm and melody on these words. Here he modulates into the stunning tonality of B Major, after taking us on a long journey through different modal centers.

III. Sanctus and IV. Pie Jesu

The devout center of this work consists of slow breath-like phrases, and is followed by an uplifting soprano solo whose stunning beauty defies any comment. The orchestra moves quietly with modest support. The two short interludes are interesting as Fauré has extracted part of the soprano melody, heard on “dona eis.” He develops this melody in the accompaniment.

V. Agnus Dei

Marked “Andante”, here is another lovely tenor line, punctuated only by some agitated dissonances at the choral entrance. The Mass’ most chromatic and dissonant gestures are heard in this movement, especially in the lowest orchestral writing. The choir remains serene, moving in regular walking steps.

On the word “Lux”, the entire orchestra drops out, leaving a dramatic soprano moment. What follows is a long section of simultaneous rhythmic ideas, including one measure of syncopation and the layering of 6/8 meter over simple 3/4 time. Next we hear his setting of “cum sanctis tui...” with chords teased into arpeggios. Linked to these is a pattern of tumbling, chromatic chords.

Finally the texture thins out, and the orchestral part, with its descending bass line, prepares us for a reprise of the Mass’s “Requiem aeternam.” One can recall Fauré’s marvelous endings, and this movement is no exception. D minor becomes D major. A “walking” idea returns with a reprise of the original “Agnus Dei.” This melody has now been heard three times. In the final seconds of this section, Fauré lifts the F of the D minor chord to F#, bringing us into D Major.

VI. Libera me

The orchestra is dramatic with drone-like chords as the baritone relates the coming of Judgment. The chorus responds on the word “Tremens” (trembling). Only in these short phrases is there some relief from the heavy, syncopated bass/organ line. Next, trumpets pronounce the Day of Wrath, and now the bass line takes up a menacing rhythm, which Fauré repeats upwards. These patterns disturb the harmonic stability.

Before this section of the Mass is ended, Libera me has returned twice, with its underlying rhythmic patterns in the accompaniments. Its dramatic urgency and prayerfulness is unmistakable.

VII. In Paradisum

Here the soprano melody soars above harp and organ arpeggios, in simple outlines of chords, transporting us to Paradisum, to heaven. It ends with long soft chords of “requiem,” a gentle call to final rest.

ABOUT THE COMPOSERS

Gabriel Fauré, like Séverac, was born in view of the Pyrennes (in Parmiers, Ariège). The youngest of six children of poor but well-educated parents, Gabriel was fostered with another family until his father secured a position as head of a school. When the four-year-old Gabriel returned to his family, he found a small organ in the school’s chapel, and it was here that his musical gifts were discovered.

Subsequently, he was sent to a musical conservatory, L’École Niedermeyer in Paris, where he studied Medieval and Renaissance musical traditions and became a piano student of Camille Saint-Saëns. Although their personalities were very different, they maintained a friendship for 60 years.

Fauré was considered a great teacher and his students, Ravel among them, adored him. This is clear from early biographical details by another student, Charles Koechlin, who described Fauré’s inspiring work ethic. With his students Fauré shared his novel ideas of composing without strict adherence to key, and treating chord changes as pivots, not commitments.

Some of Fauré’s ideas found their way into jazz, especially the use of inverted chords, chromatic lines, syncopated rhythms and a walking bass line. To a new generation of French composers Fauré introduced the idea of dissonance as a non-resolving sound, one that could provide soft color instead of leading to prescribed resolution.

Fauré continued to innovate and perfect his musical ideas into his final decade, maintaining touch with French life and politics. During the day, he composed. At night, he played chess. His last works are as delicate and refined as his earliest, especially his String Quartet.

At his death and burial his own *Requiem* Mass was sung at the Church of the Madeleine, where he had been organist and choirmaster.

Born in 1872, Déodat de Séverac took his musical training in the university city of Toulouse, then in Paris at the Schola Cantorum. In this religious-oriented school, he mastered the stylistic features of French sacred music, evidenced by this very beautiful motet.

Choosing to live in southern France—far from Paris and the Paris Conservatory, which he found too academic—Séverac preferred to live closer to nature. The titles of some of his secular compositions, such as *Baigneuses au soleil* (Sunbathers) illustrate his love of the seasons, the countryside, and the seaside.

Of all the child prodigies on our program tonight, Camille Saint-Saëns was the most brilliant. Highly

literate and knowledgeable about science and mathematics, Saint-Saëns was elegant in manner and music, ranging from the lyrical *The Swan* to the demanding *Rondo and Capriccio*, with a barbed wit evident in his *Danse Macabre*, where he re-tunes the top violin string to create tritones on the open strings, a “devilish” and striking device.

The composer of the opera, *Faust*, which is regularly performed to this day, Charles Gounod was born in Paris to a pianist mother and artist father. A teacher to Bizet, he once trained for the priesthood before cultivating his huge musical talents, and returned later in life to writing more religious musical works.

Much admired by Bizet, who heard her perform at the age of eight, Cécile Chaminade studied at the Paris Conservatoire and composed a great number of character pieces for the piano. She gave recitals with much success at the turn of the century, with a following both in England and America. In 1913 she became the first woman to receive the prize of the Légion d’Honneur. Like Hahn, Chaminade’s own performances have been captured on piano rolls and other early recordings.

Reynaldo Hahn—another child genius! Hahn composed his most famous song when he was only 12. Having moved to Paris at the age of 3, his career built upon extraordinary gifts. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of ten, and was taught by Massenet, Gounod and Saint-Saëns. Famed as a composer of French song, when he sang it was said that he performed not with a great voice, but with simplicity, elegance, and charm. Praised for his “unique, expressive musicality, [and] unfailing sense of phrasing,” Hahn recorded many of his own pieces during the decade of 1920-1930.

Jules Massenet was tutored in piano by his mother, Adélaïde Massenet, so well that he was able to enter the Paris Conservatoire at age 11. A good friend to Franz Liszt, he is best known for his many operas and song cycles.

Ernest Chausson took on the poetry of fin de siècle French Romanticism and drew mesmerizing cadences on death and decay. Sadly, he died in a bike accident at the age of 44.