

GABRIEL FAURÉ: MUSICIAN OF MODERN FRANCE

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THE era that closed with the death of Ravel, a little over ten years ago, may be looked upon as the golden age of French music, if not of French art as a whole. During that time, the leadership in originality was wrested from Germany and other countries, and France found herself in the vanguard of progress. Many of the composers who flourished in this period have won a permanent place in the musical repertory of all civilized countries. Bizet, Saint-Saens, Massenet, Franck, Debussy and Ravel are perhaps the most famous of the illustrious band. Gabriel Fauré, who is in the country of his birth, considered one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of this group has, until now, scarcely been accorded his just deserts outside of France. However, there are signs that in England and also in North America his music is gradually coming into its own. Some excellent criticism has appeared of late, and the frequent performance of his instrumental and vocal works is making the name of Fauré increasingly familiar to many to whom it was formerly but vaguely known.

If it is asked why recognition of Fauré should be so tardy in the Anglo-Saxon world the following may serve as a plausible explanation. Fauré was a composer of progressive but not radical tendencies, and, so far as the English public was concerned he tended to fall between two stools. The conservative musician was very well satisfied with the brilliant compositions of Camille Saint-Saens, which were completely orthodox in their adherence to time-honored rules and traditions. The radicals were entranced with the revolutionary art of Claude Debussy, which made no pretense to conformity with rules when that composer saw fit to deviate therefrom. The splendid merits of an art neither tethered to outworn conventions nor yet sensationally modern were for the time overlooked except in the homeland of the composer, where he came eventually to be regarded as the soundest and the sanest of 19th century composers.

I

Gabriel Urbain Fauré was born on 12 May, 1845, in the Eastern Pyrenees region of France. His father was a school

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teacher, and Fauré does not appear to have inherited his musical gift from any known ancestor. A southern Frenchman, he is said to have had something of the Arab in his appearance in earlier life, but he became in manner and bearing typically Parisian after many years of residence in the capital city. He first went there in 1854 at the age of nine to study at the Ecole Niedermeyer in the northern part of the city. The training he received was somewhat austere but was valued by him throughout the rest of his life. The next great influence on him was the personal friendship of Camille Saint-Saens, one of the most brilliant composers of his generation, who literally opened the door of the whole of music to the young pupil. Fauré always acknowledged with gratitude his indebtedness to his master, to whom he dedicated a number of important compositions.

Fauré was to spend the earlier years of his life as Church organist, a role that he filled with such conspicuous success that he was successively incumbent at St. Sulpice and the Madeleine two churches in Paris that have long been famous for their music. He began composing about the year 1865, his first works being songs. Unlike the Bohemian Debussy and the peripatetic Saint Saens, he was satisfied with a very conventional life, which kept him rooted in Paris. He was made director of the Paris Conservatory and professor of advanced composition in succession to Massenet and was a most stimulating teacher, numbering among his pupils the composers Maurice Ravel, Florent Schmitt and Roger-Ducasse. Massenet had been a brilliant lecturer, but conservative almost to the point of pedantry. Fauré sought rather to develop the inherent originality of his gifted pupils. It is thus that Ravel, whose musical style owes little or nothing to that of Fauré, could express gratitude for the encouragement that he had received from his teacher during the time spent at the Conservatoire.

Fauré's life was a long and fruitful one, but his declining years were saddened by deafness, which compelled him to resign in 1919 from his post at the Conservatoire. In spite of this affliction, which cut him to the heart, he produced several of his greatest works of chamber music thereafter. He died in 1924.

II

Although there are few who have not heard an occasional song or piano work by Fauré, the extent and importance of his

compositions may come as a surprise to most people. The opus numbers run to 118, including a large number of piano pieces, that challenge comparison with Chopin's; a hundred songs, a number of chamber works as good as any composed since Beethoven, a Requiem of singular beauty and profundity, and finally an opera, *Penelope*.

Perhaps his songs are the best known, but of these only a few are yet really familiar. It was owing more to Fauré than to any other composer save Debussy that the French art song was raised to a pinnacle of perfection approaching that of the German Lied and in some respects surpassing it. The great German poets were fortunate in that their best lyrics were set to music by such composers as Schubert, Schumann and Brahms. French poets of the 19th century were to fare perhaps equally as well in that their shorter poems were to receive astonishingly beautiful and truthful musical settings by Fauré, Debussy, Duparc and others. Of these Fauré composed one hundred, including settings of poems by Victor Hugo, Leconte de Lisle and Verlaine; Debussy composed sixty, sometimes giving musical settings to poems previously set to music by Fauré, and Duparc, sixteen which alone sufficed to give this young and unfortunate composer a high place among French composers for the voice.

Fauré's songs are difficult as the phrasing is quite different from that of German Lieder or, for that matter, English songs. No translation can ever be more than a makeshift, and an exceptionally good knowledge of French is required to sing the original words. It is deplorably seldom that we hear the vocal works of Fauré or those of Debussy, which are quite as beautiful and, if anything, more difficult. In a modern French song the accompaniment is nearly always complicated and subtle to a degree. It is not merely a chordal accompaniment but seems to have a life of its own, in places taking precedence over the voice. As a rule the music is astonishingly close to the words in emotional value. Fauré and his colleagues of the French school distrusted emotion merely for emotion's sake. They never allowed tunes to gallop away on their own. For that reason there is usually less intensity in French art songs than in Lieder, and there are fewer melodies that can be admired as melodies pure and simple. But one finds more lyric and dramatic truth as well as a greater subtlety and complexity in the technique. An outstanding example of a Fauré song that is quite well-known is *Après un Reve—After a Dream*—an inspired melody that serves as a perfect

vehicle for the elegiac poem by Romain Bussine. Indeed this melody is so intensely moving that it has attained a wide popularity, having been transcribed for the 'cello by Casals, and for the piano by Grainger. But Fauré preferred to keep emotion under control always and to make it serve the higher purposes of art. He was classical rather than romantic, he felt that all art must consist of expression resolved into form, and for that reason his settings of songs are first of all emotionally *correct* depending on the nature of the words.

The time will no doubt come when Fauré's piano music will be far better known than it is today. There is so much of it that it is difficult to make comprehensive generalizations. Fauré wrote thirteen nocturnes, thirteen barcarolles, five impromptus, a book of preludes, and a number of suites of music for solo and duet, a ballad for piano and orchestra, and a theme and variations. He resembles Saint-Saëns in using the old classical forms, and resembles Debussy and Ravel in employing the ecclesiastical modes, being in reality the first 19th century composer in Western Europe to do so. Various attempts have been made to trace the modes back to Russian influence. All modern Russian composers have been influenced by church music, and it is thought by some that Debussy wrote modally because Moussorgsky did and that Ravel was influenced in like manner by Rimsky-Korsakoff. The plain truth so far as Fauré is concerned is that his musical education at the Ecole Niedermayer included a study of the Gregorian modes and that much of the music that he played on church organs was modal. He thus came to think in terms of the modes and to compose music free from a rigid adherence to the diatonic scale.

Although at times one can discern the influence of Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin or Gounod in Fauré's piano music, taken as a whole it represents a highly individual and original output. The nocturnes are thought to be the greatest since Chopin. They may be taken perhaps as typical of the composer's style. The earliest are tuneful and very French, the sixth and seventh, profound and developed in a masterly way from beginning to end, while the last, written in old age, are sombre and austere with a touch of bitterness, anything but music for the concert-hall. The Theme and Variations, asserted by Alfred Cortot to be the greatest masterpieces in French piano music and entitled to rank among the supreme works of any school, follows, with a number of important changes, the correct pattern as exemplified by Schumann in his *Etudes Symphonies*. The

finest of the Variations are modal and, on first hearing, strike strangely in the ear. There are eleven variations on a very beautiful theme in C sharp minor, the last being in the major key. A knowledge of this piece enables me to express the opinion that this is great music and music that grows steadily on one the more one hears it.

The style of the piano pieces has some characteristics that one always associates with the Faurean idiom. The accompaniment has an arpeggio-like flow, sometimes referred to as broken figuration, and melody and harmony are so closely involved with each other that it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. The music is difficult, but there is nothing in it to suggest virtuosity. While at Weimar in 1877, Fauré submitted the MS of his ballade to Frank Liszt, who returned it to him with the terse remark that it was too difficult. But for Liszt the difficulty would be in Fauré's use of the modes and his involved style of writing, rather than in any technical matter, which, needless to say, would prove an obstacle to the greatest pianist that the world has seen.

To chamber music Fauré brought the same gifts that he brought to the piano and the human voice. The old forms were retained but new life was breathed into them. There are a string quartet, two pianoforte quartets and two quintets, (the last composed in 1921 after deafness had descended on the master) and an instrumental trio. Two violin sonatas and two for the 'cello besides a number of occasional pieces for these instruments, such as the Berceuse, Elegie and Silicienne, attest to Faure's skill in writing music of this genre. Concerning Fauré's chamber music Emile Vuillermoz has remarked: "Fauré knew how to create new lines, unseen proportions and unsuspected balances, and his work is thus much more solidly constructed than that of those engineers eternally reproducing the same mass-produced homes". "He was the first to make us understand that one could—even that one ought to—create, each one, his own form."

In composing for the orchestra Fauré was at a disadvantage. He was no symphonist, and it was an open secret that his friends and pupils did most of the orchestration for him. Notable, however, is the incidental music to Maeterlinck's drama *Pelleas et Melisande*, a work that was after to serve as libretto to Debussy's opera. This subtle and sensitive suite of music includes a Spinning song and a hauntingly beautiful Sicilienne that had previously been composed as a 'cello solo.

A work of the utmost importance, and destined to immortality, is the *Requiem*, said by one of the recent writers on Fauré to be the greatest composed since Mozart. Due allowance being made for the largeness of the claim, the *Requiem* is an inspired and beautiful work, profound in its simplicity and its measured poignancy. It is written in the strict liturgical style, but its spirit is Greek rather than Christian. It was not heard in London until 1936. Since then two recordings have been made by French and Canadian choral organizations, and the work is increasingly heard, particularly at the time of Easter.

II

Fauré was above all typically French in his style of composition. He was in his sympathies a Hellenist, which may account for the fact that he wrote musical settings for the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus and the story of Penelope as told by Homer. Since the French are the Greeks of the modern world we may look for certain characteristics in his style that are at once French and Grecian.

He lived at a time when the possibilities of composition in the major and minor scales had been about exhausted. He competed with the Germans on their own ground, but he composed music in a very different spirit from theirs. His style is characterized by the Grecian qualities of clarity, harmony and proportion. He had the horror of the well-bred Frenchman for anything turgid, strident or declamatory. His dislike of overemphasis perhaps led him to the opposite extreme and has tempted some hostile critics to term him overpolite and tame. In matters of style he is certainly the exact antithesis of Wagner and Richard Strauss. As M. Charles Koechlin has neatly said, "his music is not pugilistic."

Without a break with the past however, he was able to create a number of masterpieces that are most original and beautiful. His compositions may well serve as the true transition from the romanticists to a new school of composers, sanely progressive without being atonal and cacophonous. In the opinion of a number of eminent critics the true significance and import of his works has not yet been fully felt.

His music has been compared with moiré silk in its iridescence and fineness of texture, or to a cat with its grace, flexibility and strength without brutality. Fauré introduced new life into modern music by liberating it from dependence on the

diatonic scale. His tonal transition, his modulations are miracles of skill and are composed with an elegance and a finesse perhaps unique.

As a man he was much beloved and admired, and he exemplified many of the finest traits of his race. He was not a person of overwhelming enthusiasms but one of high character, superb intellect and unimpeachable integrity.