

## Gabriel Fauré — *Requiem*

Born in 1845 to a mother who was a member of the minor French aristocracy, Gabriel Fauré lived a life that saw the rise and passing of high romanticism, Wagnerian drama, the post-romanticism of Mahler, the atonalism of Schoenberg, the modernism of Copland. But Fauré never got caught up in those movements, choosing instead to forge ahead on his own terms, with his own sense of musical ideals and creative language.

Fauré's musical training as a young man at the Ecole Niedermeyer in Paris permeates all of his works, but particularly his religious compositions. The Ecole Niedermeyer was devoted to the training of church musicians; hence Fauré's use of old church musical methods and idioms. Moreover, the harmony textbook used at the school was far less conventional than that on which most of Fauré's contemporaries were brought up. The semi-archaic flavor which informs some of Fauré's best-loved songs owes much to this early training and is the clue to the basic musical thought behind the *Requiem*.

If Fauré's educational past built the foundation for his religious musical expressions, his personal life was largely responsible for the *Requiem*. In 1885, his father died; his mother passed away two and a half years later. In between these two catastrophes, Fauré penned his homage to the dead.

Given the circumstances, Fauré's work seems remarkably restrained, devout, at times even uplifting. This is no happenstance; nor is it the result of an eternally upbeat demeanor (throughout his life, Fauré fought bouts of depression — or what he called "spleen"). It is also worth noting that Fauré was hardly a devout man himself. He saw himself as a gentle agnostic, unwilling to surrender completely to atheism, but equally reticent to embrace the dogmatic Mother Church of 19th century France.

Indeed, it was this latter frustration which inspired the spirit of the *Requiem*. Fauré disapproved of the "purgatory and damnation" view of death as espoused by the clergy of the time and as musically expressed in the Requiems of Verdi and Berlioz, among others. Rather, Fauré saw death as eternal rest, when the soul is at peace, surrounded by the "light" of a gracious and forgiving God. "It is thus that I see death," the composer said: "as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience."

This sense permeates his *Requiem* — and goes far to explain why the work contains no *Dies irae* section, the "day of wrath" interlude that typically follows the *Kyrie eleison* section of the traditional Requiem Mass. (Verdi's dramatic temperament led him, by contrast, to turn the *Dies irae* in his own *Requiem* into a cataclysmic explosion more closely aligned to modern-day heavy metal music than to ancient sacred rites).

As Fauré's famous pupil, Nadia Boulanger, wrote of the *Requiem*, "No external effect detracts from its sober and somewhat severe expression of grief; no disquiet or agitation disturbs its profound meditation; no doubt tarnishes its unassailable faith, its quiet confidence, its tender and peaceful expectation."

The overarching tone of peaceful contemplation in the music masks an underlying complexity the musical language that Fauré deploys in the *Requiem*. Thanks to his early training, the composer developed a unique sense of fluid modality and harmony rooted equally in then-contemporary harmonic theory and historical liturgical music. His melodic lines and harmonizations are thus consonant and pleasing to the ear; yet surprisingly independent of traditional harmonic structure.

The *Requiem* is structured in seven movements. The *Introit and Kyrie* opens solemnly, almost monolithically, as if time has suddenly stopped. The entry of the organ ushers the music forward, with a lovely melody sung by the men. A second melody, sung by the treble voices, floats in, and the music drifts beautifully to the conclusion of the movement.

The entry of the voices in the *Offertoire* highlights one of Fauré's lovely and mysterious modal melodies, sung in canon by the tenors and altos in close harmony as they plead for the freeing of the souls of the departed. The baritone soloist enters, asking again for transcendence as the music rises to an uplifting end.

Built on a deceptively simple melody, the short *Sanctus* begins ethereally and rises to a triumphant climax before quickly settling back into its sweet reverie. *Pie Jesu* features the soprano soloist accompanied by simple harmonies. The *Agnus dei* movement is a study in Fauré's unique approach: Where many composers treat this section darkly or dramatically, Fauré's music is introspective, expansive, flowing. *Libera me* is the most somber music of the whole *Requiem*, an impassioned plea for liberation and redemption — yet, even here, gentleness reigns.

Then, finally, comes *In paradisum*, the famous and otherworldly finale, in which the treble voices once again float ethereally through a beautiful and simple melody against pulsing arpeggios on the organ. The music thus comes to its prayerful close.