

NORTHWEST Sinfonietta

A FLAIR FOR THE CLASSIC

Requiem

February 20, 2004 - Town Hall Seattle

February 21, 2004 - Rialto Theater Tacoma

Ravel: Introduction and Allegro for harp, flute, clarinet and string quartet

Gounod: Petite Symphonie

Faure: Requiem (original version)

Program Notes by Ron Drummond

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) was blessed with parents as loving as they were well-to-do. When they heard clear evidence of their son's musical talent, they spared no expense to provide him with the finest musical education Paris could offer. At first he progressed rapidly, gaining admission to the Paris Conservatoire at age 14. But over the next six years his academic performance was uneven, and the awards-based system of advancement proved consistently vexing to him. Meanwhile, his experiences outside the Conservatoire were providing Ravel with the artistic nourishment he needed. The Javanese gamelan music he heard at the Paris World Exhibition in 1889 cast a lasting enchantment over his imagination. Concerts of Russian music given by Rimsky-Korsakov were similarly inspiring. This sense of an ever-expanding world was deepened through his friendship with the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes, a fellow student, who became an important ally in his exploration of the contemporary arts. Ravel's evolving sense of aesthetics deepened through his readings of Baudelaire, Poe, and Mallarmé. Meetings with Chabrier and Satie in 1893 were highly influential on his early compositions.

In July 1895 Ravel left the Conservatoire; though he resumed his studies in 1897 as a member of Fauré's composition class, it's perhaps not surprising that Ravel's distinctive musical style first emerged in works written in the interim. By 1900, his music was starting to be performed, and though success was not immediate, he was encouraged by a show of interest from Debussy. Meanwhile, Ravel's failure to secure a prize in fugal writing had forced him from the student rolls at the Conservatoire. Still, he was determined to win its biggest prize, the famous Prix de Rome. In 1900, he failed the qualifying rounds, and though allowed to compete in each of the next three years, the cantatas he wrote, now considered classics, were all judged inferior to the winners, works long since forgotten. During these same years, Ravel wrote the *Jeux d'eau* for piano, the String Quartet, and the orchestral song cycle *Shéhérazade*, three watershed works that brought him lasting fame.

When Ravel tried for the Prix a fifth time, in 1905, in the qualifying rounds he deliberately broke the academic rules of choral and fugal writing and was disqualified outright. As Ravel was now quite famous, a storm of protest against the Conservatoire broke out, forcing the school's director to resign - to be replaced by Fauré and a more open-minded administration.

Ravel wrote the *Introduction et allegro* for harp, flute, clarinet, and string quartet in the immediate wake of this controversy. Knowing this, it's hard not to hear the work's opening ambivalence as reflecting it. There's something redolent of mourning and farewell in the clarinet's opening phrases and the quartet's reply, but then, before a melodic profile can be fully defined, that opening gesture does an about-face, the harp on its entry turning the theme firmly away from sadness to something forward-looking and hopeful. That pattern, whereby a melody is transformed halfway through its unfolding, limns the structure of the entire work, from *très lent* to *allegro*. For Ravel, "everything had to be done - or seem to be done - by a miracle," and that magical sense permeates this music, yet his craftsmanship is impeccable throughout, discipline in the latter being essential to successfully evoking the former. Multifaceted in its deployment of the available sonorities, the musical discourse slowly gives precedence to the harp, which, contrary to its pacifist reputation, leads

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emphatically, its taut lines full of tension and grace, while subtle combinations of wind and strings cast color and shade. The result is a gem filled with all the clarity - and bent light - of sunshot water.

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The music and sensibilities of Charles Gounod (1818-1893) fluctuated throughout his life between the poles of sacred and profane love, often ambiguously. Well educated in the theory, practice, and history of music, his earliest successes as a composer came with settings of the mass in an austere, *a capella* style inspired by Palestrina. A brief flirtation with the priesthood in the late 1840s gave way to an infatuation with the famed opera singer Pauline Viardot, who led him to switch to opera, but his first efforts, marred by an effort to imitate Meyerbeer, were failures. His greatest mass, the *Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile* of 1855, with full orchestra and soloists added to the choir, was florid, almost operatic in style, thus blending the two extremes. For the next decade, Gounod was at the height of his powers, and his engagement by the Theater Lyrique in 1858 led to the composition of the five operas for which he is remembered today. Dispensing with Meyerbeerian pretense, Gounod embraced his natural gift for writing unpretentiously lyrical music, wedding it to familiar stories. His greatest success came with his 1859 setting of the love story from Goethe's *Faust*. Rejecting spectacle for its own sake and seeking to humanize even the lesser roles, Gounod mixed song types and singing styles, formal expression and informal, to musically delineate character in ways never before seen in opera.

During the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, he and his family took refuge in England. Success there turned to scandal when Gounod took an English opera singer as his mistress, and his wife fled back to Paris. After suffering a stroke in 1874, a badly shaken Gounod ended his affair and returned to France. Thereafter both the quality and quantity of his composing declined. After several operatic failures, he drifted back towards sacred music. An oratorio, *La rédemption*, was performed to mixed and sometimes savage reviews.

Though Gounod wrote little instrumental music, the two symphonies of 1855, the *Petite symphonie* of 1885, and a handful of late string quartets are all skillfully wrought essays in traditional forms, graceful and unpretentious. We can be grateful to the flutist Paul Taffanel, who commissioned the *Petite symphonie* for a Paris concert series devoted to wind chamber music. Gounod took the Mozartian wind octet consisting of pairs of clarinets, oboes, horns, and bassoons and added a single prominently featured flute to the mix. With an overall character of elegant conversation, the work features a Haydnesque slow introduction to a lively allegro, and a slow movement like an operatic aria for flute over sonorous winds. In the Scherzo and Finale, the musical ideas are beguiling both in their charm and in the manner of their distribution amongst the players.

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Perhaps the most haunting image from the life of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) is that of the old blind woman sitting in the chapel adjoining the Ecole Normale at Montgauzy, listening raptly to the little boy playing harmonium for hours on end. At that point, young Gabriel had had no musical training, but simply loved the sound of the instrument, and so played with it, seeking those combinations most pleasing to the ear. And the old lady returned, again and again sitting in the otherwise empty chapel to listen and chat with the boy and give him advice. Eventually she told his father, who taught at the school, about his gift for music.

A lifetime later, in a letter written when he was almost as close to the end of his life as that little boy in Montgauzy had been to the beginning, Fauré recalled the famous work he'd composed in the middle of his life. The *Requiem*, he wrote, was created purely "for the pleasure of it." But in taking up that work in the fall of 1887, it was natural and inevitable that his thoughts would turn to things of the spirit, to the fact of his own mortality, and especially to recollections of the loved ones he had lost. This included his father, who died in 1885 (his mother died just as he was close to completing the *Requiem*, though he was unable to finish

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it in time for her funeral). I can't help but feel that Fauré must have thought, too, of the old blind woman, by then long dead, whose name is now lost to posterity (had he forgotten it? Did he ever know it in the first place?), the woman who, by listening to him so intently, affirmed the value of his childhood musical explorations. What an extraordinary gift. I can't help but wonder if Fauré sensed her hovering in the back of his imagination, listening to all the music he wrote, ever after.

Fauré's *Requiem* has had a complicated history. Recent scholarship shows that the version of the work that's most familiar to music-lovers is the farthest removed from the composer's intentions: the grand version for large orchestra and chorus was done at the publisher's request, and the kind and number of errors in that edition are so great as to strongly suggest that Fauré had little to do with it.

A religious sceptic, Fauré had no interest in creating grand evocations of wonder and fear and the torment awaiting the damned. The choirmaster at the fashionable Parisian church of the Madeleine (Proustians take note), Fauré sought to create a contemplative work that would provide solace to those grieving by holding out the promise of eternal rest and peace for the departed. Thus, in the original version, completed in mid-January 1888, Fauré only set four movements from the standard liturgical Requiem - *Introit et Kyrie, Sanctus, Pie Jesu, Agnus Dei* - plus the *In Paradisum* from the Burial Service. (Only the autograph manuscripts from the original version survive; the *Pie Jesu*, the only movement with a soprano solo, is missing.) The standard choir was augmented with a modest orchestra of violas, cellos, basses, harp, timpani, and organ, the strings often doubling the organ; the *Sanctus* added a solo violin.

For four years this spare work served the needs of the Madeleine's congregation. For reasons that are unclear, late in 1892 Fauré prepared an expansion, including two extra movements. The *Offertoire* was written in 1889 and the *Libera me*, which introduced a whiff of the brimstone that had previously gone missing, was originally written as a stand-alone work in 1877; both movements feature baritone solos. Fauré also added parts for bassoons, horns, and trumpets, considerably enlarging the overall sound, plus violins in the *In Paradisum*.

Though we have Fauré's 1898 letter to the publisher Hamelle promising to prepare the *Requiem* for publication, there is no indication in it that the work is to be further enlarged. Yet that's what was published in 1900, a huge work demanding large performing forces that take it out of the church and into the concert hall. What's puzzling is that the arrangements are often sloppy and the printed score and parts are full of typos, something Fauré, who was very meticulous, wouldn't have allowed. Yet Fauré did allow the edition to be reprinted without corrections.

It's important to bear in mind that Fauré was almost insistently small-scale in his musical conceptions, preferring chamber music to orchestral and the intimacy of church performance to the concert hall. His *Requiem* was intended from the beginning to be intimate, though why Fauré never published the smaller version is unknown. Yet there's no mistaking his original intent, and so in the early 1980s the composer and conductor John Rutter undertook to reconstruct the earlier versions. Because the two movements added in 1893 are so beautiful, and the new horn parts add so much to the character of the music, Rutter decided the second version of the *Requiem* was the best, though his edition allows conductors to strip it down to the original version as well. We choose the fuller version.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, there's no flamboyance or theatricality in Fauré's *Requiem*, only a great purity and directness of expression, a purity and directness that becomes profound in the one place where it might find profundity: in the open ears of a soulful listener.