

# Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets



Graham Johnson

An Ashgate Book

With translations of the song texts by Richard Stokes

Gabriel Fauré:  
The Songs and their Poets



*Gabriel Fauré at the Hotel Métropole, Lugano, summer of 1912, working on his opera Pénélope*

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*For Pamela Lidiard*



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# Contents

Foreword and Acknowledgements .....	xiii
Songs through a Life: An Overview .....	xix
<i>Chapter One: An Indifference to Success</i> .....	1
<i>Chapter Two: Second Empire and First Songs</i> .....	25
<i>Victor Hugo</i>	
(1) <i>Le Papillon et la fleur</i> (Hugo) 1861 .....	38
(2) <i>Mai</i> (Hugo) 1862? .....	40
(3) <i>Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre</i> (Hugo) 1862 .....	41
(4) <i>Rêve d'amour</i> (Hugo) 1864 .....	43
(5) <i>Tristesse d'Olympio</i> (Hugo) c.1865 .....	45
(6) <i>Dans les ruines d'une abbaye</i> (Hugo) c.1865 .....	47
(7) <i>L'Aurore</i> (Hugo) c.1870 .....	49
<i>Chapter Three: War and Peace on Parnassus</i> .....	53
<i>Théophile Gautier, Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle, Charles Baudelaire</i>	
(8) <i>Les Matelots</i> (Gautier) c.1870 .....	59
(9) <i>Lydia</i> (Leconte de Lisle) c.1870 .....	63
(10) <i>Hymne</i> (Baudelaire) c.1870 .....	70
(11) <i>Seule!</i> (Gautier) 1871 .....	73
(12) <i>L'Absent</i> (Hugo) 1871 .....	75
(13) <i>La Rançon</i> (Baudelaire) 1871? .....	76
(14) <i>Chant d'automne</i> (Baudelaire) 1871? .....	78
(15) <i>Chanson du pêcheur</i> (Lamento) (Gautier) 1872? .....	79
<i>Chapter Four: Chez Mme P. Viardot-Garcia</i> .....	85
<i>Louis Pomey, Marc Monnier, Sully Prudhomme, Romain Bussine</i>	
(16) <i>Aubade</i> (Pomey) c.1873 .....	88
(17) <i>Tristesse</i> (Gautier) c.1873 .....	90
(18) <i>Barcarolle</i> (Monnier) 1873 .....	92
(19) <i>Puisqu'ici-bas toute âme</i> (Hugo) c.1863–73 .....	94
(20) <i>Tarentelle</i> (Monnier) 1873 .....	96
(21) <i>Ici-bas!</i> (Sully Prudhomme) 1874? .....	97
(22) <i>Au bord de l'eau</i> (Sully Prudhomme) 1875 .....	99
(23) <i>Après un rêve</i> (Bussine) 1877 .....	101

<i>Chapter Five: 1878, A Transitional Year of Song</i> .....	107
<i>Paul de Choudens, Charles Grandmougin</i>	
(24) <i>Sérénade toscane</i> (Bussine) 1878? .....	109
(25) <i>Sylvie</i> (Choudens) 1878 .....	111
*       *       *	
<i>Poème d'un jour</i> (Grandmougin) 1878 .....	115
(26) <i>Rencontre</i> .....	115
(27) <i>Toujours</i> .....	116
(28) <i>Adieu</i> .....	118
*       *       *	
(29) <i>Nell</i> (Leconte de Lisle) 1878 .....	120
(30) <i>Le Voyageur</i> (Silvestre) 1878? .....	123
(31) <i>Automne</i> (Silvestre) 1878.....	124
 <i>Chapter Six: Bachelor and Husband – The Silvestre Years</i> .....	129
<i>Armand Silvestre, Victor Wilder</i>	
(32) <i>Les Berceaux</i> (Sully Prudhomme) 1879 .....	130
(33) <i>Notre amour</i> (Silvestre) c.1879 .....	134
(34) <i>Le Secret</i> (Silvestre) 1881 .....	136
(35) <i>Le Ruisseau</i> (anon.) 1881? .....	138
(36) <i>Chanson d'amour</i> (Silvestre) 1882.....	140
(37) <i>La Fée aux chansons</i> (Silvestre) 1882.....	141
(38) <i>Madrigal</i> (Silvestre) 1883.....	145
(39) <i>Aurore</i> (Silvestre) 1884 .....	146
(40) <i>Fleur jetée</i> (Silvestre) 1884 .....	147
(41) <i>Le Pays des Rêves</i> (Silvestre) 1884 .....	149
(42) <i>Les Roses d'Ispahan</i> (Leconte de Lisle) 1884.....	150
(43) <i>Noël</i> (Wilder) 1885 .....	152
 <i>Chapter Seven: Crisis and Decadence</i> .....	157
<i>Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, Jean Richepin, Edmond Haraucourt, Stéphan Bordèse</i>	
(44) <i>Nocturne</i> (Villiers de L'Isle-Adam) 1886.....	163
(45) <i>Les Présents</i> (Villiers de L'Isle-Adam) 1887.....	166
(46) <i>Au cimetière</i> (Richepin) 1888.....	170
(47) <i>Larmes</i> (Richepin) 1888 .....	173
*       *       *	
<i>Shylock</i> (Haraucourt) 1889 .....	176
(48) <i>Chanson</i> .....	176
(49) <i>Madrigal</i> .....	178
*       *       *	
(50) <i>La Rose (Ode anacréontique)</i> (Leconte de Lisle) 1890 .....	181
(51) <i>En prière</i> (Bordèse) 1890.....	184

<i>Chapter Eight: Fauré and Paul Verlaine (I)</i>	189
(52) <i>Clair de lune (Menuet)</i> (Verlaine) 1887	198
(53) <i>Spleen</i> (Verlaine) 1888	200
*       *       *	
<i>Cinq mélodies 'de Venise'</i> (Verlaine) 1891	207
(54) <i>Mandoline</i>	207
(55) <i>En sourdine</i>	209
(56) <i>Green</i>	211
(57) <i>À Clymène</i>	212
(58) <i>C'est l'extase</i>	214
 <i>Chapter Nine: Fauré and Paul Verlaine (II)</i>	219
<i>La Bonne chanson</i> (Verlaine) 1892–94	228
(59) <i>Une Sainte en son auréole</i>	228
(60) <i>Puisque l'aube grandit</i>	230
(61) <i>La Lune blanche</i>	231
(62) <i>J'allais par des chemins perfides</i>	232
(63) <i>J'ai presque peur, en vérité</i>	233
(64) <i>Avant que tu ne t'en ailles</i>	235
(65) <i>Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été</i>	236
(66) <i>N'est-ce pas?</i>	237
(67) <i>L'Hiver a cessé</i>	238
*       *       *	
(68) <i>Prison</i> (Verlaine) 1894	240
 <i>Chapter Ten: Crossing the Divide – Towards the Late Style</i>	249
<i>Molière, Albert Samain, Maurice Maeterlinck, Catulle Mendès</i>	
(69) <i>Sérénade du Bourgeois gentilhomme</i> (Molière) 1893	250
(70) <i>Soir</i> (Samain) 1894	254
(71) <i>Pleurs d'or</i> (Samain) 1896	259
(72) <i>Le Parfum impérissable</i> (Leconte de Lisle) 1897	262
(73) <i>Arpège</i> (Samain) 1897	264
(74) <i>Mélisande's Song</i> (Maeterlinck) 1898	265
(75) <i>Accompagnement</i> (Samain) 1902	273
(76) <i>La Fleur qui va sur l'eau</i> (Mendès) 1902	275
(77) <i>Dans la forêt de septembre</i> (Mendès) 1902	277
(78) <i>Le Plus doux chemin (Madrigal)</i> (Silvestre) 1904	280
(79) <i>Le Ramier (Madrigal)</i> (Silvestre) 1904	282
 <i>Chapter Eleven: Interlude: The Silent Gift</i>	287
<i>Jean Dominique, Henri de Régnier</i>	
(80) <i>Le Don silencieux</i> (Dominique) 1906	290
(81) <i>Chanson</i> (Régnier) 1906	294
(82) <i>Vocalise-étude</i> 1906	296

<i>Chapter Twelve: Fauré and Charles Van Lerberghe (I)</i>	299
<i>La Chanson d'Ève</i> (Van Lerberghe) 1906–10	309
(83) <i>Paradis</i>	309
(84) <i>Prima verba</i>	311
(85) <i>Roses ardentes</i>	312
(86) <i>Comme Dieu rayonne</i>	313
(87) <i>L'Aube blanche</i>	314
(88) <i>Eau vivante</i>	315
(89) <i>Veilles-tu, ma senteur de soleil?</i>	316
(90) <i>Dans un parfum de roses blanches</i>	317
(91) <i>Crépuscule</i>	318
(92) <i>Ô mort, poussière d'étoiles</i>	319
 <i>Chapter Thirteen: Fauré and Charles Van Lerberghe (II)</i>	325
<i>Le Jardin clos</i> (Van Lerberghe) 1914	332
(93) <i>Exaucement</i>	332
(94) <i>Quand tu plonges tes yeux</i>	333
(95) <i>La Messagère</i>	334
(96) <i>Je me poserai sur ton coeur</i>	335
(97) <i>Dans la nymphée</i>	336
(98) <i>Dans la pénombre</i>	337
(99) <i>Il m'est cher, Amour, le bandeau</i>	338
(100) <i>Inscription sur le sable</i>	339
 <i>Chapter Fourteen: Mirages and Horizons</i>	345
<i>Renée de Brimont, Georgette Debladis, Jean de La Ville de Mirmont</i>	
<i>Mirages</i> (Brimont) 1919	347
(101) <i>Cygne sur l'eau</i>	347
(102) <i>Reflets dans l'eau</i>	349
(103) <i>Jardin nocturne</i>	352
(104) <i>Danseuse</i>	354
*       *       *	
(105) <i>C'est la paix</i> (Debladis) 1919	357
*       *       *	
<i>L'Horizon chimérique</i> (La Ville de Mirmont) 1921	361
(106) <i>La Mer est infinie</i>	361
(107) <i>Je me suis embarqué</i>	362
(108) <i>Diane, Séléné</i>	363
(109) <i>Vaisseaux, nous vous aurons aimés en pure perte</i>	364
 <i>Chapter Fifteen: Some Notes on the Performance of Fauré's Songs</i>	373
The Practical Musician	373
Capabilities, Negative and Otherwise	375
Role-Play	376

The Actor-in-Music .....	377
The Battle of the Books .....	378
Deconstruction and Context.....	380
Unknown Ancestry.....	380
L'École française.....	381
Amateur versus Professional.....	382
Lied versus mélodie .....	384
Sentiment, Sentimentality and 'the Voice' .....	387
Seeing the Woods, not the Trees .....	388
The Composer is Always Right.....	389
The Pitiless Beat .....	390
<i>Chapter Sixteen: The Pianist's Workshop (wherein Singers are Always Welcome)</i> .....	395
Fauré as a Pianist.....	395
The Conductor and the Accompanist.....	396
A Modest Metronome Disclaimer .....	397
A Word about Discography.....	399
The Songs: Rehearsal Notes and Metronome Markings .....	399–428
Appendix 1: The Songs of Fauré in their Opus Number Groupings.....	429
Appendix 2: The Tonalities of Fauré's <i>mélodies</i> .....	433
General Index .....	441
Index of Poets and Settings .....	451
Index of Song Titles .....	458





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## Foreword and Acknowledgements

**T**his book is the outcome of a project I directed in 2005 at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London: the complete songs and duets of Fauré were performed by dozens of student singers and pianists. Before this I had recorded the songs on four CDs with an array of professional singers (as well as with Ronan O'Hora in piano duets) for Hyperion Records. The chance to work on this music with artists of different ages and levels of experience was extremely revealing and provided the impetus to write a study of this kind under the imprint of the school in which I am honoured to teach.

The full scope of Fauré's greatness as a composer cannot be appreciated by a study of his songs alone, and this is a book, first and foremost, about Fauré's songs. In the case of some composers such specialism comes at a higher cost than others; a comparison with Schubert in this regard is not inappropriate, for it is all too easy to write about that composer's lieder while conveniently ignoring his vast output in other spheres. I have endeavoured to incorporate as much information as I can to provide a more rounded picture of Fauré than as a mere composer of *mélodies* – not that there is anything 'mere' about this extraordinary repertoire. Throughout the book I have referred to his other works in the hope that readers will follow-up these signposts towards a greater understanding of the totality of the composer's achievement. Nevertheless it seems to me that the songs are as good a starting place as any in Fauré's œuvre to initiate in the student a deeper understanding of the composer's genius, and how he gradually changed from a salon composer of the 1860s and 1870s to take his rightful place as a great sage of early twentieth-century music.

Although *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* contains a certain amount of information not easily available elsewhere, particularly regarding the song texts and their authors, I lay no claim to having broken a great deal of new musicological ground. Like almost all practising musicians, whose writing about music must be fitted in between concert engagements, I have relied on established biographical sources and benefitted from the first-hand research of the experts acknowledged overleaf, the scholars who have sifted documents, studied manuscripts, and done all the research in the field which earns for them the admiration and gratitude of their performing colleagues. What comes at first hand, however, is my experience of the music itself. I have unearthed no new letters, and no brand new facts about Fauré's life, but the interpretation of those established facts, and of the music itself, is my own. I remain someone who has puzzled over and loved this composer at close quarters for three decades and more.

My first teacher of accompaniment at the Royal Academy of Music – John Streets – was also the first out-and-out Fauré enthusiast I had ever encountered. For him this composer's songs, to my initial astonishment, were automatically taken to be as important as Debussy's – or even Schubert's. My fellow-student Felicity Lott and I were coached in the *Cinq mélodies 'de Venise'* among other *mélodies*; the late cycle *Mirages* was spoken about, rightly, as a masterpiece with no room for dissent. It was some thirty-five years ago that Streets (also Head of Opera at the RAM) oversaw a fine student production of the opera *Pénélope*, the first in the UK. In 1999 the Guildhall School presented the same work to my rather less puzzled and more seasoned ears. My own students at the Guildhall, fascinated and sometimes perplexed, were on the beginning of their own journeys with Fauré, but that is as it should be; he is a composer of, and for, a lifetime – and it sometimes takes a lifetime to appreciate him fully.

As a pianist who encounters Fauré's songs, if not every day of the week, then almost every week of the year, I became aware of the need among English-speaking students and listeners for a song-oriented guide to the composer's life, or to put it another way, a book that places the vocal achievements of an exceptionally long musical career into a time-frame and a biographical context. The complete texts of the songs with translations by Richard Stokes can be read separately, skipping my commentaries, as a means of following this composer on his journey through the literature of his time. If this book enables singers and pianists to devise their recital programmes with anything like the fastidious taste that is the hallmark of this composer himself, and if the commentaries encourage potential performers to look at music that otherwise would have remained unexplored on the shelf, it will have fulfilled its purpose.

Everyone writing about Fauré in our time is in the debt of Jean-Michel Nectoux, who has dominated scholarship around this composer for decades. I am extremely grateful to him for his help via a correspondence that has been (at least for me) fascinating, and for his continuing devotion to every aspect of Fauréan detail. Despite the fact that his current musicological and art-historical interests have taken him into other areas (including the resplendent *Harmonie en bleu et or – Debussy, la musique et les arts*, Paris: Fayard, 2005), M. Nectoux has taken on board my various enquiries and requests regarding Fauré with punctual and good-humoured exactitude. For permission to quote frequently from his published writings I am very grateful, and also for permission to use some of the rare photographs in his possession. Some time ago it was his happy idea in one of his publications to link the endearing photograph of Fauré to be seen at the beginning of Chapter 10 of this book with the title of one of the composer's most haunting songs – *Dans la forêt de septembre*. The paradox inherent in the original French title of M. Nectoux's major book *Gabriel Fauré: Les Voix du clair-obscur* (translated by Roger Nichols as *Fauré: A Musical Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) encouraged me in turn to choose a cover design for my own book with the composer photographed standing at the piano in his apartment at boulevard Maeshherbes, only partly lit by the afternoon sun, the 'demi-jour' of Verlaine's *En sourdine*. The caption's reference to the composer's *Dans la pénombre* alludes of course to the title of a song in *Le Jardin clos*.

Unfortunately the projected five-volume edition of the *mélodies* to be published by Leduc as part of the complete Fauré edition under M. Nectoux's aegis will not be available for some time, although the first volume of this series is now with the publishers. M. Nectoux's collaborator on this edition of songs is Mimi Daitz of New York City. I am grateful to Ms Daitz for her advice and help, and for an unforgettable evening spent with her and her husband Stephen, who recited Homer in ancient Greek for us with a mastery that would have fascinated the composer of *Lydia* and *Pénélope*. Also

present on that convivial occasion was Susan Youens, the great Schubert scholar, whose expertise in the field of the *mélodie*, an earlier specialism as far as her career is concerned, has been one of the many things that enriches our friendship. That Fauré scholarship is in fine fettle in the United States is proved by the more recent work of Carlos Caballero, whose remarkable *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) was, and remains, an inspiration. A recent masterclass for Rosemary Hyler's *Songfest* in Malibu, California, presented me with a stunning array of young singers and pianists from all over the country, all enraptured (and coping wonderfully well – dare I say unexpectedly?) with *La Bonne chanson*. This was indeed heartening for the Fauréan future across the Atlantic. One can detect there a backlash against an era of emptiness and spin, and the youngsters' hunger for music of this depth seemed to me happily associated with a gradual shift of *Zeitgeist*. I am deeply grateful to my friend Dr Gerald Perman (President and Musical Director of the Vocal Arts Society of Washington DC as well as a distinguished psychiatrist, now retired) for our correspondence concerning Fauré's early childhood.

Scholars of the past will always have their august role to play in a book of this kind, and there is no greater debt than that to the philosopher and musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–1985). The depth and eloquence of Jankélévitch's books on music in general, and on Fauré in particular (*Gabriel Fauré et ses mélodies* first appeared in the late 1930s and has since been reissued in various editions), is such as to discourage anyone else writing on the subject. Indeed it has long done so, and I am aware that I am one of the few to break, with some trepidation, this awed silence. Jankélévitch's study was the first to make a case for considering Fauré's song output as a chronicle of an artistic journey complete in itself, but it is written in a poetic, allusive style that renders it almost untranslatable from the original French. It is also a masterpiece by a great aesthete, and it is little wonder that other writers, not to mention performers, should be wary of entering the same territory. However indispensable Jankélévitch's book remains, it is perhaps not the easiest starting point for the English reader and student, mainly because it contains none of the song texts themselves and it assumes an enormous background knowledge about the composer's music. If it were merely the purpose of my own volume to prepare the reader to embark on Jankélévitch's amazing study I should be satisfied.

English writers on Fauré have long continued the tradition of helpful enthusiasm for this composer established by the ever-hospitable (and rich) Frank Schuster in the London of the 1890s. After my studentship my first serious conversations about Fauré were with the late and much-missed critic Felix Aprahamian, doyen of musical Francophiles in London. When he masterminded a festival of Fauré's works during the Second World War at Wigmore Hall he spotted a tall elderly lady, up from the country for the day, waiting for return tickets. It was one of the triumphs of his life to be able to usher, with some ceremony, the Princesse de Polignac, into a seat; she had gone into exile in Devon during the hostilities and had been, over sixty years earlier, the 'onlie begetter' of some of the music soon to be heard.

Norman Suckling's book for the 'Master Musicians' series, *Fauré* (London: Dent, 1946), is also that of a philosopher, and it remains an underestimated source of trenchant observations on the Fauré style. Every scholar of French music in English-speaking countries is by now indebted to the work of Robert Orledge, who has marked out his own special niche in Fauré studies, especially in regard to his analysis of the composer's harmonic world, *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Eulenburg, 1979). Jessica Duchén's more recent and accessibly illustrated book on Fauré, *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Phaidon, 2000), has almost certainly won the composer many English-speaking friends. I continue to miss conversations on every aspect of the song repertoire with the late Eric Sams, despite his reluctance

to appreciate the later songs of Fauré. This had always been a bone of contention between him and his son Jeremy, whose affection for, and knowledge of, these inscrutable cycles is second to none.

I must thank other people who have also helped me in the writing of this book. That great Poulenc expert and translator Sidney Buckland has come to my aid on more than one occasion. I am grateful to M. Thierry Bodin in Paris for giving me permission to perform and reproduce an unpublished song by Fauré – *Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre* – of which he owns the autograph; he has also shared his encyclopaedic knowledge of nineteenth-century French musical life. For the open-hearted and almost casual (because so easily given) generosity of my collaborator Richard Stokes when it comes to projects such as these, I am only one of many to offer praise and gratitude. Dr Jonathan Katz kindly provided translations from Latin and Greek. Steven Isserlis made extremely helpful comments on one of the chapters, and Stephen Hough on another; my colleague François Le Roux has been a generous source of information. Robert White in New York, with an eagle's eye for detail, has been as always a source of support and perspicacity, and I am grateful to that great expert on all matters relating to the Polignac family, Sylvia Kahan, also of New York City, for her advice concerning certain aspects of this book's iconography. Michael Kennedy shared with me his thoughts on the Elgar–Fauré connection, and my former student, the pianist and musicologist Roger Moseley, discussed with me the writing of Roland Barthes. In connection with Frank Schuster, Jill Balcon relayed to me information from Lady Spender, Sir Stephen Spender's widow. Those great *doyens* of vocal recorded music, Vivian Liff and his partner the late and much missed George Stuart, were kind enough to put me in touch with Marc Matzner in Los Angeles. Mr Matzner, a hugely well-informed connoisseur of fine singing, enabled me to hear many of the records of artists (especially those of the unaccountably forgotten Noémie Pérugia) that were not contained in my own collection. His willingness to make these and other recordings available to me with the aid of modern technology was kindness itself.

Heidi Bishop at Ashgate has spent a good deal of extra time and trouble in seeing this book through to publication. I must also acknowledge the efficiency and patience of Sarah Charters, and thank John Peacock for his splendid book design. Fiona Little's fine-tuning of the text was remarkably thorough, while always tactful. I wish to express my ongoing gratitude to my partner, Brandon Velarde, for his support for this project, as well as for his indulgence of the domestic vagaries of an author in the middle of a time-consuming project such as this. Geoffrey, Gerald and Harry also extended as much patience to me as is possible to expect of regally demanding cats when it came to impromptu adjustments (the author busy at his desk) to their morning and evening feeding times. It was not lost on me at the time that Emile Vuillermoz spoke of Fauré's 'cat-like flexibility' and Vladimir Jankélévitch referred to Fauré's music falling on its feet with the precision of a cat. Suckling expands this comparison to explain the admiration of a certain kind of animal owner, as well as certain kind of listener, for Fauré's art:

Strength without brutality; muscles which achieve grace all the more perfectly because they do not have to strain after it – these are essentially feline traits; and on the less tangible side a demand for understanding before it will yield you its companionship, and a distinction of character which prevents it from being degraded to the function of a mere toy or a mere stimulant.<sup>1</sup>



*Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* is first and foremost a Guildhall School of Music production, so I wish to close these acknowledgements with thanks to my colleagues there. George Odam worked on an earlier version of the manuscript and Rebecca Heath was helpful during the later stages. Robin Bowman, Head of Vocal Studies (now retired), and Ronan O'Hora, Head of Keyboard Studies, were instrumental in crafting the concert series that led to the writing of this study. The support of the Guildhall School Principal for these concerts and for musical research has been a major factor in my attempting a work of this scope. Needless to say, without Dr Barry Ife's continuing support, both moral and material, a book of this size could never have been published under the school's auspices.

Without the enthusiasm of our Deputy Head of Keyboard Studies I cannot imagine that we could have undertaken the Britten, Fauré and Heine song projects in the first place. She is 'mother' of our very demanding accompaniment course and an indispensable part of the students' lives. Her calm and tenacity in the face of serious illness, and her refusal to be away from the school for a day, nay hour, more than necessary, have been more inspiring than is possible to describe. In the midst of everything else she has read the manuscript and made comments, and for lots of practical reasons this book could not have been written without her. She has always played the Fauré songs beautifully and teaches them with love. Her calm courage, a quality that recalls the stoicism of the composer himself, has been an example to us all.

On behalf of her colleagues at the Guildhall School of Music, and in gratitude for her tireless work on behalf of its pianists and singers this book is dedicated to Pamela Lidiard.

Graham Johnson  
London

1 Norman Suckling, *Fauré* (London: Dent, 1946), p. 12.



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# Gabriel Fauré:

## Songs through a Life

*He belongs to that very rare breed of men who improve all the time as one gets to know them better ...*

Camille Saint-Saëns in a letter to Pauline Viardot, 23 July 1877

- 1845** On 12 May at 4 o'clock in the morning, Gabriel Urbain Fauré is born in Pamiers, Ariège, sixth child of Toussaint-Honoré Fauré (1810–1885) and Marie-Antoinette-Hélène Fauré, née de Lalène-Laprade (1809–1887). The baby is christened the next day and consigned to a wet-nurse in nearby Verniolle. Fauré is fifteen years younger than his eldest sibling, his only sister, Rose-Élodie-Gabrielle, known as Victoire.
- 1849** The family moves to Montgauzy, near Foix, where Fauré *père* has been promoted to head the École Normale. From about 1850 Gabriel takes music lessons and improvises on the chapel harmonium. In 1853 Toussaint Fauré consults Monsieur Dufaur de Saubiac about the future course of his son's education.
- 1854** Gabriel is taken to Paris and entrusted to the care of the pedagogue and composer Louis Niedermeyer, who has recently opened (1853) a new school for young church musicians. Fauré wins various prizes (for both music and literary studies) at the École Niedermeyer from 1857 onwards.
- 1861** After the death of Niedermeyer (14 March), Camille Saint-Saëns (aged twenty-six) joins the staff of the school. Fauré composes (1) *Le Papillon et la fleur* (Hugo).
- 1862** Saint-Saëns is invited to holiday with the Fauré family in Tarbes in August. Three further Victor Hugo settings almost certainly date from this year: (2) *Mai*, the lost song *L'Aube naît* and *Puisqu'ici-bas*, a one-time solo setting that becomes a duet in 1873 (see below). The autograph of a fourth Hugo song, (3) *Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre*, is clearly dated 8 December 1862. This third piece remains unpublished.



- 1863** Fauré passes his organ examination with distinction, just failing to obtain the first prize (it is never his favourite instrument). He writes a piano sonata for his niece that has never been published.
- 1864** (4) *Rêve d'amour* is composed on 5 May. Between May and August the publisher Choudens negotiates with Victor Hugo for the publishing rights for the six *romances* by Fauré (see above), with texts by the great poet; in that number are included two settings that remain unpublished.
- 1865** Fauré leaves the École Niedermeyer at the end of July after winning a first prize for the composition of *Cantique de Jean Racine*. (5) *Tristesse d'Olympio* possibly dates from this time, as well as (6) *Dans les ruines d'une abbaye* (both Hugo). Both songs could equally well have been composed at the beginning of the Rennes period (see below).
- 1866–70** Having left school at last, and in need of regular employment, Fauré takes up a place in January 1866 as organist at Saint-Saveur in Rennes (Brittany), where his address is 4 rue de Nemours. He lives and works there, somewhat uneventfully, for the next four years. He holidays with Saint-Saëns in Brittany in August 1866. He accompanies the famous opera singer Madame Miolan-Carvalho on a recital tour of Brittany in the summer of 1868.
- 1869** He signs his first contract with the publisher Choudens to issue *Le Papillon et la fleur* and *Dans les ruines d'une abbaye*.
- 1870** Fauré moves back to Paris, where he is briefly organist at Notre-Dame-de-Clignancourt. He meets Lalo, Duparc and César Franck. With the declaration of the Franco-Prussian War in July Fauré enlists in the First Light Infantry Regiment of the Imperial Guard. He sees action in the battles of Champigny, Le Bourget and Créteil. It is also probably at some time during 1870 that he composes the Hugo setting (7) *L'Aurore*, as well as (8) *Les Matelots* (Gautier), (9) *Lydia* (Leconte de Lisle) and (10) *Hymne* (Baudelaire).
- 1871** With the Armistice at the end of January Fauré returns to Paris and lives with his brother Amand. In February he is a founder member of the Société Nationale de Musique (SNM). In March he flees the dangers of the Commune in June and takes up temporary exile in Switzerland; four months later he returns to Paris to take up the post of organist at St Sulpice (October). Fauré completes his last Hugo solo setting, (12) *L'Absent*, on 3 April. In December the publisher Georges Hartmann issues a volume of four songs: *Lydia*, *Hymne*, *Mai* and the more recently composed (11) *Seule!* (Gautier). (13) *La Rançon* and (14) *Chant d'automne* (both to Baudelaire texts) are probably composed in this year.

- 1872** Fauré is introduced to the circle of the celebrated singer and composer Pauline Viardot, where he meets Gounod, Flaubert and George Sand among many other celebrities. He also becomes friends with Camille Clerc and his wife Marie, serious music lovers who are hosts of many summer sojourns in Normandy. Marie takes on a mothering role in the composer's life, particularly in terms of encouraging the composition of chamber music. It is probably in this year that Fauré composes his Gautier setting (15) *Chanson du pêcheur* (Lamento).
- 1873** It is probably at some point in 1873 that Fauré composes (16) *Aubade* (Pomey) as well as (17) *Tristesse* (Gautier). Madame Édouard Lalo sings *Chanson du pêcheur* at a concert of the SNM. On 19 October he finishes (18) *Barcarolle* (Monnier) and dedicates it to Pauline Viardot. At about this time he composes the duets (19) *Puisqu'ici-bas* (a Hugo setting that adapts musical material from a solo song written a decade earlier) and (20) *Tarentelle* (Monnier).
- 1874** Fauré leaves St Sulpice in order to deputise for Saint-Saëns at the Madeleine. (21) *Ici-bas!* (Sully Prudhomme) is probably composed at this time. He spends the summer with the Clercs in Sainte-Adresse in Normandy after installing himself at his new Parisian address, 7 rue de Parme, in the nineteenth *arrondissement*.
- 1875** On 10 April Claudie and Marianne Viardot give the first performances of the duets *Puisqu'ici-bas* and *Tarentelle*, which Fauré dedicates to them. He works on an ambitious violin sonata. He summers once again at Sainte-Adresse. In August he writes (22) *Au bord de l'eau* (Sully Prudhomme).
- 1876** In April Pauline Viardot sings *Chanson du pêcheur* and *Barcarolle* for the SNM. In May Georges Hartmann hands over the rights of four Fauré songs to the composer's new publisher, Choudens. The *Cantique de Jean Racine* is published by the firm of F. Schoen. Thanks to the negotiations of Camille Clerc, the Leipzig firm of Breitkopf & Härtel accepts Fauré's Violin Sonata in A major, Op. 13, for publication. He begins the Piano Quartet in C minor, Op. 15.
- 1877** The year begins with triumphant performances of the A major Violin Sonata, including one at the home of Benjamin Godard. In April Fauré becomes choirmaster (*maître de chapelle*) at the Madeleine; to make ends meet he has to give numerous piano and harmony lessons. In July he becomes engaged to Marianne Viardot, with whom he has been smitten for some time. She breaks off the engagement in October. In December Fauré travels with Saint-Saëns to Weimar for the première of the older composer's *Samson et Dalila*. The song (23) *Après un rêve* (Bussine) is composed. Choudens publishes five separate songs: *Lydia*, *Mai*, *Ici-bas!*, *Barcarolle* and *Au bord de l'eau*.

- 1878** (25) *Sylvie* (Choudens), the three songs of the cycle (26–28) *Poème d'un jour* (Grandmougin), the celebrated (29) *Nell* (Leconte de Lisle) and the equally famous (31) *Automne* (Silvestre) are all composed in 1878. (30) *Le Voyageur* (Silvestre) and (24) *Sérénade toscane* (Bussine) probably date from this year. A performance at the end of June of *Les Djinns* in its version for choir and orchestra (conducted by Colonne, and repeated in February 1879) is the composer's definitive farewell to Hugo.
- 1879** In January Choudens publishes *Hymne, Chant d'automne, L'Absent* and *Sérénade toscane*. In April Fauré journeys to Cologne to see two Wagner productions. During the spring he composes (32) *Les Berceaux* (Sully Prudhomme). In September he goes to Munich with Messager to see Wagner's *Ring*. He finishes the solo piano version of the *Ballade*. In December Choudens publishes the first *recueil* of *Vingt mélodies*. The song (33) *Notre amour* (Silvestre) is probably written during this year.
- 1880** The celebrated *Élegie* for cello and piano is given its first performance at the home of Saint-Saëns. In November *Poème d'un jour* appears as a single volume published by Durand.
- 1881** The song (34) *Le Secret* (Silvestre) is completed (6 July). Fauré visits Munich for the third time, on this occasion with his friends the Baugnies, to hear *Lohengrin, Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*. *Messe des pêcheurs de Villerville* is composed in collaboration with Messager, and it is more than likely that the vocal quartet (35) *Le Ruisseau* (to an anonymous text) for two-part female choir and piano also dates from this year; it receives its first performance on 14 January 1882.
- 1882** Fauré visits London for a performance of Wagner's *Ring*. Songs of this year are the two Silvestre settings (36) *Chanson d'amour* and (37) *La Fée aux chansons*. In September Fauré stays at Villerville with the Clercs for the last time. Camille Clerc dies in November.
- 1883** Fauré's cantata *La Naissance de Vénus* is performed. On 27 March he marries Marie Fremiet, daughter of a well-known sculptor, and he moves into a new home, 93 avenue Niel, in the seventeenth *arrondissement* of Paris. (38) *Madrigal* (Silvestre), for vocal quartet (or chorus) and piano, is dated 1 December 1883. On 29 December his first son, Emmanuel, is born. Marie will insist that their children add her birth name (and that of their grandfather, the sculptor) to their surname – thus Fauré-Fremiet.
- 1884** The first three nocturnes for piano are published. This is a year rich in songs – 20 May: (39) *Aurore* (Silvestre); 25 May: (40) *Fleur jetée* (Silvestre); 30 May: (41) *Le Pays des rêves* (Silvestre); 6 June: (42) *Les Roses d'Ispahan* (Leconte de Lisle, orchestrated in 1890). All four, as well as the part-song *Madrigal*, are performed at two concerts of the SNM in December.
- 1885** Fauré's Symphony in D minor receives a cool reception at the SNM. The composer later destroys this work. His father dies on 25 July. The *cantique* entitled (43) *Noël* (Wilder) dates from this time.

- 1886** Fauré meets the celebrated aesthete Robert de Montesquiou, who becomes his ‘literary adviser’. (44) *Nocturne* (Villiers de L’Isle Adam) is composed in this year, as are the Second Piano Quartet Op. 45 and the Fourth Barcarolle for piano. During a visit to Paris in June, Tchaikovsky finds the First Piano Quartet ‘excellent’. In October the Fauré family move to a bigger apartment at 154 boulevard Malesherbes in the seventeenth *arrondissement*, near the Madeleine.
- 1887** On 26 April a concert entitled ‘Audition de mélodies de Fauré’ is given at the home of Robert de Montesquiou. (45) *Les Présents* (Villiers de L’Isle Adam) dates from this year, as does (52) *Clair de lune*, the composer’s first setting of Verlaine. Fauré’s portrait is painted by Jacques-Emile Blanche. He stays in Dieppe as the guest of Élisabeth Greffulhe. The composer’s mother dies on 31 December.
- 1888** The first performance of Fauré’s *Requiem* is given at the Madeleine on 16 January; in May the work is performed non-liturgically with brass added to the string orchestra. Fauré plays the harmonium at a performance of Chabrier’s opera *Gwendoline* at the home of Winnaretta Singer, Princesse de Sceaux-Montbéliard. He makes his first journey to Bayreuth, where he meets Debussy and is received cordially by Wagner’s family. Three songs are composed in November: (46) *Au cimetière* (Richepin), (47) *Larmes* (Richepin) and (53) *Spleen* (Verlaine).
- 1889** Fauré’s music for Dumas’s play *Caligula* (first performed in November 1888 at the Odéon) is performed at the SNM. Tchaikovsky finds it ‘adorable’. John Singer Sargent paints Fauré’s portrait. The composer’s second son, Philippe, is born on 28 July in Prunay, where Fauré regularly spends the summers at the home of his parents-in-law. He visits the Comtesse Greffulhe for a brief holiday at Bois-Boudran at the end of September. The incidental music for Haraucourt’s play *Shylock* – including (48) *Chanson* and (49) *Madrigal* – is composed in the autumn and receives its first performance at the Odéon in December.
- 1890** Fauré is commissioned to write an opera by Winnaretta Singer to a text of his own choosing. This never-to-be-realised project gradually becomes a millstone around the composer’s neck. In August he visits the Passion Play at Oberammergau and finishes (50) *La Rose* (Leconte de Lisle). In the autumn the firm of Hamelle republishes the first volume of *Vingt mélodies* (originally issued by Choudens) in two keys for soprano and mezzo. The *cantique* entitled (51) *En prière* (Bordèse) dates from this year and is given its first performance on 28 December in an orchestrally accompanied version.
- 1891** Fauré works at a piano quintet. He asks Paul Verlaine for an opera libretto. This collaboration comes to nothing, but Verlaine’s poetry will nevertheless play an important part in the year’s work. In May he is invited to stay as the guest of Winnaretta Singer at the Palazzo Wolkoff in Venice and begins the sketches for (54) *Mandoline*. He returns to Paris on 20 June, travelling via Florence and Genoa, and finishes (55) *En sourdine*. (56) *Green* is completed on 23 July; (57) *À Clymène* is written in August; in September he completes these (54–58) *Cinq mélodies ‘de Venise’*, to Verlaine texts, with (58) *C’est l’extase*.

- 1892** The tenor Maurice Bagès gives the first public performance of the *Cinq mélodies 'de Venise'* in April. On 1 June Fauré succeeds Guiraud as inspector of instruction (*inspecteur de l'enseignement*), supervising the provincial conservatoires. In the summer at Prunay he meets and falls in love with a married woman, the amateur soprano, Emma Bardac. Inspired by her, (59) *Une Sainte en son auréole* – the first song in the cycle later published as *La Bonne chanson* – is written on 17 September. The first song from the cycle actually to be composed is (65) *Donc, ce sera par un clair jour d'été* on 9 August.
- 1893** In February Fauré begins the incidental music for *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (Molière), a production that fails to reach the stage. The (69) *Sérénade* from that work will remain unpublished until 1957. On 27 October Fauré plays the organ for Gounod's funeral at the Madeleine. Between May and December he continues work on *La Bonne chanson*. The composer's passionate involvement with Emma Bardac is now at its height.
- 1894** In February Fauré completes (59–67) *La Bonne chanson*, and the nine-song cycle is published in April; its first public performance is given on the 25th of that month at the home of the Comte de Saussine, with the tenor Maurice Bagès accompanied by the composer. In the same month at the École des Beaux-Arts Fauré accompanies his arrangement of the dubiously transcribed *Hymne à Apollon* recently unearthed in Delphi. In the summer he resumes work on his piano quintet, and completes the famous Sixth Nocturne on 3 August and the *Tantum ergo* later in the same month. A festival of Fauré's works in Geneva in November is followed by a visit to London, where a concert is devoted to his chamber music at St James's Hall. He composes (68) *Prison* (Verlaine) on 4 December, and (70) *Soir* (Samain) on the 17th of the same month.
- 1895** The composer at fifty. A year without songs. Fauré makes an unsuccessful attempt to become the music critic of *Le Figaro*. The post goes to another composer, Alfred Bruneau. Fauré composes the *Thème et variations* for piano.
- 1896** On 10 January Fauré plays the organ for Verlaine's funeral. On 21 April he completes the duet (71) *Pleurs d'or* (Samain), which is given its first performance in London. In June he relinquishes his position as choirmaster at the Madeleine and takes up the more senior post of organist. As a result of a temporary break with Hamelle, the two songs *Soir* and *Prison* are issued by the publisher Fromont. Fauré journeys for the second time to Bayreuth, this time in the company of Winnaretta Singer, now Princesse de Polignac. In October he succeeds Massenet as professor of composition at the Conservatoire. He makes another successful visit to London, where Metzler publishes six songs with English translations.

- 1897** In June Hamelle publishes the second *recueil*, a bigger collection this time of *Vingt-cinq mélodies*. This includes six songs that will later be transferred, against the composer's wishes, to the beginning of Hamelle's *troisième recueil* of 1908. In London Metzler publishes another twelve songs for the English-speaking market. On 22 August Fauré completes (72) *Le Parfum impérissable* (Leconte de Lisle), and on 6 September (73) *Arpège* (Samain).
- 1898** Maurice Ravel enters Fauré's composition class at the Conservatoire. During a visit to London in late March and early April Fauré is commissioned by Mrs Patrick Campbell to write the incidental music for the English production of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. On 1 April the tenor Maurice Bagès sings *La Bonne chanson* (the first performance of the version with piano and string quintet) at the home of Frank Schuster in Westminster. On 31 May Fauré sets (74) *Mélisande's Song* to the English translation of J.W. Mackail. This production (with its première on 21 June) is a great success, and Fauré himself conducts nine performances in the Prince of Wales Theatre, London. There is a revival in October of that year at the Lyceum.
- 1899–1901** After the success of *Déjanire* by Saint-Saëns at the open-air arena of Béziers in August 1899, the summer of 1900 sees the acclaimed performance of Fauré's outdoor drama with music, *Prométhée*. This is an important turning point in his career, opening important stylistic doors. At Béziers Fauré meets the young pianist Marguerite Hasselmans, who becomes his constant companion for the rest of his life, particularly when he is on his frequent travels. Nevertheless he continues to maintain the marital home in the rue des Vignes, and when he is away he corresponds assiduously with his wife, particularly on musical matters. *Prométhée* is revived in 1901. The Prince Edmond de Polignac dies in August. At the end of that year Ravel dedicates the piano piece *Jeux d'eau* to his teacher Fauré. This is another period when no songs are composed.
- 1902** In March Fauré accompanies Émilie Girette in a recital of his songs. It is for her that (75) *Accompagnement* (Samain) is written on 28 March. In April and May he attends several performances of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique. On 13 September he finishes (76) *La Fleur qui va sur l'eau* (Mendès), and on 29 September (77) *Dans la forêt de septembre* (to a text by the same poet).
- 1903** In March Fauré begins his work as music critic at *Le Figaro*, a position he will hold until 1921. In April he is appointed *officier* of the Légion d'Honneur. In the summer of this year he is troubled by the first signs of his loss of hearing. He enjoys a late summer holiday in Lausanne (the first of a long series of working sojourns in Switzerland) and returns to his piano quintet, first sketched in 1891. Ravel dedicates his String Quartet in F to Fauré.

- 1904** *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Fauré's music is revived in London with Sarah Bernhardt. Debussy attends a performance in the company of Mary Garden, his first *Mélisande*. Fauré returns to the poet Armand Silvestre for two settings: (78) *Le Plus doux chemin* and (79) *Le Ramier*.
- 1905** The composer turns sixty in May. On 15 June he is appointed director of the Paris Conservatoire. In July he signs a new contract with the publishing house of Heugel. In October he plays the organ for the last time at the Madeleine.
- 1906** In March the composer is made aware by Belgian friends of Charles Van Lerberghe's cycle of poems *La Chanson d'Ève*. At the beginning of June he finishes (91) *Crépuscule*, which will eventually be the ninth song in the cycle. In May there is a large Fauré festival at the SNM, where Jane Bathori sings *La Bonne chanson*. On 20 August Fauré finishes (80) *Le Don silencieux* (Dominique) during a stay in Vitznau, Lac des Quatres Cantons. On a holiday in Stresa he finishes (83) *Paradis* on 8 September. This is to be the first song in *La Chanson d'Ève*. On 28 September the second, (84) *Prima verba*, is completed in Lausanne. (81) *Chanson* (Régner) and the (82) *Vocalise-étude* are also composed in this year.
- 1907** Edouard Risler's performances of Fauré's Fourth Impromptu and Eighth Barcarolle, as well as a performance of the First Piano Quintet, are given at the same SNM concert where Ravel's song cycle *Histoires naturelles* (performed by Jane Bathori) causes great controversy. (The same singer has given the first performance of *Le Don silencieux* in Brussels in March.) Fauré begins work on his opera *Pénélope*. No further songs from *La Chanson d'Ève* are written in this year, which also marks the death of the poet Van Lerberghe.
- 1908** In March a concert at Bechstein (Wigmore) Hall in London includes a performance of *La Bonne chanson* by Jeanne Raunay, as well as several items from *La Chanson d'Ève*. (85) *Roses ardentes* and (87) *L'Aube blanche* from this cycle are completed in June. Hamelle publishes the third *recueil* of Fauré's songs. The composer continues work on his opera, and he visits England at the end of the year.
- 1909** Fauré signs a new contract with the publisher Heugel. He is elected to the Institut on 13 March while away in Barcelona. There is another recital by Jeanne Raunay, this time in the Salle Erard, with seven songs from the new cycle. Work on *La Chanson d'Ève* is continued in Lugano between July and October. From that cycle (86) *Comme Dieu rayonne*, (88) *Eau vivante* and (90) *Dans un parfum de roses blanches* are composed.
- 1910** In January, with the composition of (89) *Veilles-tu, ma senteur de soleil?* and the valedictory (92) *Ô mort, poussière d'étoiles*, the cycle (83–92) *La Chanson d'Ève* is complete at last. In April the ten songs are published as a cycle in a single volume. Fauré visits Russia and Finland in the most extensive foreign tour of his working life.

- 1911–13** In April 1911, after twenty-five years, the Fauré household leaves the Plaine Monceau and moves to a newly built luxury flat at Passy: 32 rue des Vignes, in the sixteenth *arrondissement*. This period of the composer's life is given over to the composition and preparation of the opera *Pénélope*, which receives its Paris première on 2 October 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées with Lucienne Bréval in the title role. *Pénélope* is also performed on 1 December 1913 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, this time with Claire Croiza. During this period there are also opportunities for the composer to accompany song recitals by such artists as Germaine Sanderson and Jeanne Raunay.
- 1914** In February the first biography of Fauré (by Louis Vuillemin) appears. The pianist Robert Lortat gives cycles of complete performances of Fauré's piano music in both Paris and London. In the last week of July, on holiday in Bad Ems in Germany, the composer works on the opening songs of the cycle *Le Jardin clos*. The outbreak of the First World War disrupts Fauré's summer (his younger son Philippe joins up), but (93–100) *Le Jardin clos*, a 'suite' of eight *mélodies*, is completed in the autumn.
- 1915** *Le Jardin clos* is given its first performance on 28 January by Claire Croiza accompanied by Alfred Casella. The work is published in May by Durand. Fauré composes his Twelfth Nocturne and his Twelfth Barcarolle. He edits the piano music of Schumann for his new publisher, and also prepares an edition of Bach's 48 *Preludes and Fugues*.
- 1916–18** Fauré works on an edition of the organ works of Bach (thirteen volumes up to 1920). He writes two movements of the Second Violin Sonata, which is finished in May 1917. In May of that year he begins a cello sonata, a work which is completed some months later. In 1918 he suffers considerable ill-health, exacerbated by the deaths of his brothers Fernand and Amand.
- 1919** *Pénélope* returns to the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique. In April *Masques et bergamasques* (a Verlaine-inspired work that includes orchestrations of earlier songs) is very successful in Monaco. From mid-July to mid-September Fauré stays at the Villa Dunand, Annecy-le-Vieux, where he composes a song cycle of four *mélodies*, (101–104) *Mirages* (Brimont), as well as beginning the Second Piano Quintet. *Mirages* is given its first performance on 27 December at the SNM by Madeleine Grey; the first private performance of the work, with the same singer, was a month earlier in Fauré's office in the Conservatoire. On 8 December Fauré composes a song, (105) *C'est la paix*, to a prize-winning text by a reader of *Le Figaro* – the otherwise completely unknown Georgette Debladis.
- 1920** Fauré, seriously ill at the beginning of the year, continues work on the Second Piano Quintet, completing the second and third movements. He visits Venice again in the company of the Lortats. At the beginning of October he retires from the Conservatoire. In November he hears *Pénélope* again in Brussels, sung by Croiza.



- 1921** The release from Conservatoire duties initiates an Indian summer in the composer's life. He finishes the Second Piano Quintet, and writes the Thirteenth Barcarolle. He begins the Second Cello Sonata, which is finished by mid-November. In the autumn of the year he writes the four *mélodies* of (106–109) *L'Horizon chimérique* (Jean de La Ville de Mirmont). With the death of Saint-Saëns on 16 December, this period of prolific creativity comes to an end.
- 1922–24** On 13 May 1922 *L'Horizon chimérique* is given its first performance at the SNM. In June there is a concert of national homage at the Sorbonne with the singers Croiza, Panzéra and Raunay, the pianists Cortot and Lortat, the cellist Casals and the conductor-composers D'Indy and Messager. Fauré suffers from bronchial pneumonia, his shortness of breath exacerbated by a lifetime of smoking. In 1923 he is awarded the *Grand Croix* of the Légion d'Honneur, an unusual honour for a musician. The Piano Trio is performed, and he begins work on his last composition, the String Quartet. He sketches a song, *Ronsard à son âme*, in honour of the poet's 400th anniversary, but he destroys this on hearing that his student Ravel has set the same poem. Fauré turns seventy-nine on 12 May 1924, and enters his eightieth year. Despite serious illness he completes his String Quartet in September. He dies at his Paris home, 32 rue des Vignes, on 4 November. On 8 November he is accorded a state funeral at the Madeleine and buried in Passy cemetery. His wife survives him by less than eighteen months: Marie Fauré dies on 13 March 1926.

## *Chapter One*

# **An Indifference to Success**

In the late 1890s Marcel Proust, peerless observer of human nature as well as discerning music lover, was often at concerts and gatherings where Gabriel Fauré performed his own works. He noticed that the composer's reaction to applause was different from that of most other artists: the revered musician seemed to take little pleasure in public approval, including Proust's own 'uproarious enthusiasm.' The great novelist of the future wrote to Fauré and admiringly described this response, or lack of response, as a 'disdainful indifference to success'.<sup>1</sup>

Only on very rare occasions do we catch a glimpse of Fauré being pleased by any expression of warmth from his audience: he wrote mischievously to his wife from Russia that his old rival Théodore Dubois would have been unsettled by the cheers of 'Fauré! Fauré!' in St Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> On the whole however we sense that after each public appearance he would have preferred to disappear entirely, if only to avoid the tiresome social obligations that went hand in hand with fame. When the time came for the final bow, his death in 1924, he made it quite clear to his sons that he was not at all worried about being forgotten for a while, and that indeed he seemed to think it was to be expected and inevitable. If he had been told that it was his fate to be written out of musical history altogether it would have been typical of Fauré to have greeted the news with perfect equanimity.

It would be all too easy, alarmingly easy, to imagine a world without him and his music. Gabriel Fauré is part of no inevitable musical lineage; instead he came as if from nowhere, like an unexpected blessing. He left the world inestimably richer as far as his listeners and admirers are concerned, but there was no successor in sight. That overused word 'inimitable' applies to him as it applies to few other artists. The composer was something of a loner all his life, but in terms of history he seems even more so; he slipped quietly into the narrative of musical France, and after decades of fruitful work he slipped quietly out again – honoured and admired, always respected, but hardly imitated. He was also much loved; Émile Vuillermoz wrote of Fauré at the time of the composer's death: 'Great geniuses of the past have been given more solemn tributes of admiration, have called forth more demonstrative enthusiasm; they have acted with more intensity on the crowd and known a more universal, and noisy fame; but none of them, in departing, have made hearts grieve more painfully.'<sup>3</sup>

It is a truism that the French are individualists and cut their cloth according to their own style. The passing of a mantle from one great composer to another is a German, rather than a French, notion; thus Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert overlap each other in a solemn Viennese succession, making it difficult at times to disentangle some of the threads that bind together their histories, both personal and musical. This is despite the fact that these composers spent little time (sometimes none) in each other's company. In France – or, to be more specific, in Paris – there was more personal interaction between artistic personalities, but composers made way for each other politely in the street (as might those determinedly competitive automobiles, Renault and Citroën) without sacrificing a whit of their differently wired autonomy.

French composers had a much greater inclination than their German or British colleagues to dine and socialise with each other, though very seldom in their own homes. The boulevard and café culture of Paris played a huge part in the cross-pollination of the arts in France, a country where people seemed to bump into each other all the time. Thanks largely to that remarkable institution, the Société Nationale de la Musique, formed shortly after the Franco-Prussian War, French composers of completely different sympathies sat side by side at many a function and developed a perfectly amicable means of getting on with each other with varying degrees of warmth. Fauré's relationship with his contemporaries runs the full gamut between his filial devotion to Saint-Saëns and his lifelong aversion to Massenet. Somewhere between these two extremes were his relaxed, affectionate relationship with his *copain* Messager and his cool but always punctilious exchanges with Debussy.

If we were to remove any of the above-named composers – Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Messager, Debussy – from the annals of French musical history, there would be any number of knock-on effects. In his youth Saint-Saëns, a tireless participant in musical politics, built essential bridges between French and German music (although he attempted to destroy them in later years); there is scarcely anything to parallel the manner in which he played the role of Fauré's teacher, mentor and publicist and for so many years. Had Saint-Saëns not existed it is very possible that the subject of this book would hardly strike us now as being worthy of extended comment. Debussy relied on Messager, dedicatee and conductor of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, at crucial moments in his career, and French operetta continued to revolve around the influence of this master of light music well into modern times. Without Massenet an entire chapter in the history of French opera would have to be re-written; his example was crucial to the early Debussy, and without Debussy the whole of French music in the twentieth century would be entirely different, right up to Boulez and beyond.

Fauré's indispensability is more difficult to pin down. If he had been absent from the fabric of the story, as if in a French version of the James Stewart film *It's a Wonderful Life*, many details in other people's lives might have been different: Ravel might have suffered and rebelled in the hands of a less liberal composition teacher, the Conservatoire would have been less welcoming to twentieth-century talents in the hands of another director, and so on. Fauré was the type of man who made a personal difference to many musicians who were instructed and blessed by his wisdom and his *gentillesse*. But there was no single younger composer who was as dear to him, as indispensable, as he had been to Saint-Saëns, and it is hard to imagine what might have changed if he had never written the *Requiem*, much less *Pénélope* or *La Chanson d'Ève*. Of course our own

lives would have been incomparably poorer in musical terms, but it would have been that kind of impoverishment that we would never know, unless the thing we had lost were before our eyes and ears; no school of musicians is undermined by the removal of these works, and with their disappearance we lose no other masterpieces by composers dependent on Fauré's example.

There are other composers of the period who seem equally 'one-off', but whose historical absence would be disruptive. What would have been the future of French song without the slender output of Duparc, whose influence extended to almost all his song-composing contemporaries? Emmanuel Chabrier seems to have been every bit as self-sufficient as Fauré and without musical issue – and yet, when we listen to the music of Francis Poulenc, we realise that without Chabrier's example Poulenc would have been a different composer. (As a younger man he vehemently disliked Fauré's music, although he was later to recant to an extent, and he accompanied some of the songs beautifully.) If we look very hard we may find a trace of Fauré in the early work of his young admirer, another, very different, member of 'Les Six', Arthur Honegger. The concision of Albert Roussel (though not his harmonic world) seems vaguely influenced by the self-discipline of Fauré's late style. The early and scarcely known songs of Nadia Boulanger have a Fauréan tinge, but we look in vain for it in the music of other pupils such as Charles Koechlin and Florent Schmitt. The pupil who was probably most influenced by the older teacher is now a sadly forgotten name – Jean Roger-Ducasse. Ravel strikes a Fauréan note very rarely; at the time when he wrote his earliest songs he was already under the spell of Erik Satie in his medievalist phase, a man whose impact on music in the twentieth century is literally incalculable. Ravel's 'ouverture de féerie' entitled *Shéhérazade*, composed when Fauré was still his teacher, looks beyond Paris to the inspiration of the Russian masters (whose country Fauré visited in physical terms, but whose influence never touched his music). If the *dépouillé* nature of Ravel's later songs and chamber music (*Ronsard à son âme*, for example, and *Rêves*) echo the minimalist character of Fauré's last period, this was probably more to do with Ravel's encroaching illness than with his desire to emulate the hermetic style of his former teacher.

From whatever angle we look at it, Fauré stands alone.

This sounds rather negative, as if no one quite admired Fauré enough to copy him, but the lack of imitators is surely because this composer is impossible to imitate convincingly. There is a complexity and subtlety in his harmonic language that puts it beyond emulation, facile or otherwise. Fauré's style is too elusive to fabricate as a party trick, and as a result is avoided by *pasticheurs*. It is hardly difficult to 'do a Debussy' via the whole-tone scale, just as the comedienne Anna Russell did with a spoof that shamelessly imitated the manner of the *Chansons de Bilitis*. Ravel found it disarmingly easy to write music *à la manière* of other composers, and Satie wrote *Le Chapelier*, a song about the mad-hatter's tea-party, in the style of Gounod, but Fauré was spared these affectionate ribbings. Although it was quite possible to write musical homages derived from the letters of his name, his own music might be better known if it were possible to encapsulate his style in a musical pastiche.

As a child pianist I found Schubert difficult to pin down; his music seemed to fall between the two schools of Mozart and Beethoven, while being neither. I understood the *galant* style of rococo music with an Alberti bass and classed this as 'Mozart'; I knew the *Sturm und Drang*

of *Pathétique*-like fury and thought of this as ‘Beethoven’. I was not yet ready for someone like Schubert who was purely of himself, someone who did not personify a school of music, and could not be reduced to a historical formula for the purposes of instant recognition, however instantly recognisable his music when he wrote it himself. Of course I only realised this much later. On hearing Fauré for the first time I was subject to the same kind of mystification: where on earth did this composer fit into musical history as I imagined it to be? His music, infinitely charming, was neither as catchy nor as virile as Bizet’s *Carmen*, nor as hypnotically sensual as Debussy, who seemed to me as a teenager to be French music personified. Where does Fauré come from? This was my question, and the answer, if there is an answer at all, is more complicated than I could ever have realised.



Fauré’s provenance has nothing to do with the world of opera so dear to the French – it is true that at times his music can have the poise of Rameau, but Grétry, Monsigny and Philidor are not his ancestors, and neither is the Parisian visitor Gluck – although when we hear the strength and grandeur of the opera *Pénélope* for the first time we are tempted to revise this opinion. He was immune to the immensity of Berlioz, whose music meant little to him throughout his life. In his mid-twenties Fauré lost an organist’s job by attending a performance of *Les Huguenots* instead of playing a service, but on the whole the great trundling operas of Meyerbeer passed the younger composer by, as did the lighter Offenbach. (An evocation of the latter may be glimpsed only in the spoof piano duet that Fauré wrote with Messager on themes from Wagner’s operas). Of Wagner’s music itself Fauré knew a great deal (only after he had left school and had travelled to Germany), but he was able to admire it without importing it into his own work (save a few *Siegfried*-inspired birdcalls in the *Ballade* for piano, a modulatory moment in the *Nocturne* from *Shylock*, and Eb arpeggios at the beginning of *Le Ruisseau*, a musical stream that amusingly implies a watered-down opening of *Das Rheingold*).<sup>4</sup> This ability to confine himself to one or two rueful allusions as far as Wagner was concerned indicates Fauré’s inoculated single-mindedness; if composers such as Chausson and D’Indy had been similarly impervious when writing their large stage works they might have written operas that held the stage. A cynic would here intervene to point out that Fauré’s *Pénélope*, for all its greater originality, is hardly a work to be heard every day in the world’s opera houses.

If Fauré was influenced by foreign composers at all, they were not theatre composers but rather composer–pianists. Saint-Saëns, his piano teacher at the École Niedermeyer, played Liszt and Schumann to his students despite the fact that these composers were not on the syllabus. There are echoes of Liszt’s music to be found in some of the higher-lying passages of Fauré’s solo piano works just as there are many discernible traces of Mendelssohn’s urbane facility and charm. The first piano works of Fauré even have a Mendelssohnian title – *Trois romances sans paroles*, ‘Three Songs without Words’. There is an even deeper link with Schumann, whose solo piano music, according to the Princesse de Polignac, Fauré played better than anyone else. The piano writing in the Baudelaire settings *Chant d’automne* and *La Raçon* has a Schumannesque flavour that recalls the arpeggiated accompaniment of Schumann’s song *Der Nußbaum*, and Françoise Gervais has pointed out how Fauré might have been influenced by that composer’s use of harmony

in the sixth of his *Noveletten*.<sup>5</sup> (Fauré had the kind of musical mind that was influenced not only by the sound of another person's music, but also by how it was written down in terms of harmonic syntax.) Both composers, the German and the French, had dreamy, internalised natures that shielded a private world of fecund and highly personal harmonic invention, and Schumann was more famous in the French salons than any other German composer. Nevertheless, one has to go no further than Fauré's earlier nocturnes to see that his debt to Chopin is equally large. How moving it must have been for the young composer to encounter George Sand at the salon of Pauline Viardot! The easy, languid grace of the Polish expatriate, combined with an almost diabolical sophistication in the deployment of harmony, must have been addictively appealing to Fauré, and in the earlier of his works it shows. (Once again Chopin's complex orthography, and the way he 'spelled' his harmonic progressions, will have fascinated and influenced the young composer.) But all these are links to piano rather than vocal music, and nothing in the vocal lines of Fauré songs, only occasional passages in their accompaniments, refers back to Schumann or Chopin, Mendelssohn or Liszt. If we are to consider who influenced Fauré's *mélodies*, the subject of this book after all, we must search nearer to home.



It is likely that he would have been at least aware of the female composers Pauline Duchambge and Loïsa Puget, who had cornered the *romance* market, where anodyne little songs were sumptuously published with beautiful accompanying engravings – the former composer at her height before he was born, and the latter in the years of his childhood.



Title-page of songs by Loïsa Puget (1810–1889) and the illustration for the Indian-inspired romance *La Bayadère*

Although Berlioz was scathing about the *romance* and its sentimental practitioners, Fauré was more likely to have encountered these harmless songs in his childhood than Berlioz's sophisticated and controversial settings of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* in French translation, published as *Irlande*. There were almost certainly no volumes of *romances* to be found lying around Fauré's home, and his school concentrated religiously on the study of renaissance polyphony and church music. We must assume however that a certain number of songs, some old-fashioned, some less so, came his way somehow or other. Some of these by such composers as Hypolite Monpou (published in the 1830s and 1840s), Ernest Reyer, Félicien David and Henri Reber (all published between the 1840s and 1860s) and Edouard Lalo (*Six mélodies* to texts of Hugo, 1856) would have made some impression on Fauré if they had been available within the portals of the École Niedermeyer or during the school holidays. As we shall see, it may have been the success of this Lalo work that inspired the young composer to concentrate on assembling his own group of songs, also with Hugo texts, in the early 1860s.

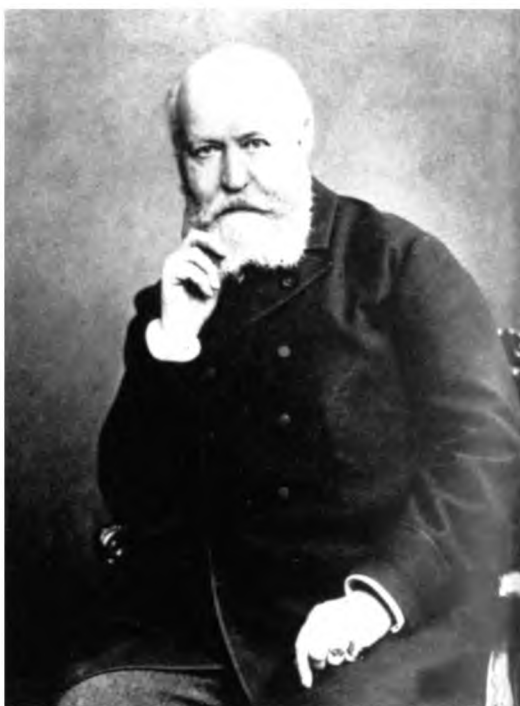
We do know that Niedermeyer, head and founder of the school, encouraged the Fauré when still a little boy to sing folksongs from the Ariège for the delectation of visitors (the young Gabriel must have had a pretty singing voice), but the composer as an adult expressed absolutely no interest in folksong as a point of departure for his own music – although his contemporary D'Indy and Fauré's most famous pupil Ravel were to be of another mind entirely. Surprisingly, we know nothing of the secular vocal music Fauré admired as a teenager; it is much easier to discover the songs that influenced the young Schubert when he was still at school. Schubert's family, like Fauré's, was not in a position to furnish him with printed music by other composers, but some of his school friends were able to do so, thanks to their wealthier parents. Fauré's awareness of the contemporary *romance* and *mélodie* probably came from similar sources, and as a result of a similar curiosity. (And speaking of Schubert one must not forget that this composer's songs were published in France in the 1830s by Richault – Niedermeyer's publisher – and it is by no means impossible that Fauré came to know some of them at a relatively young age.<sup>6</sup>) As the students were permitted to sing secular music only when on walks, one can imagine pieces smuggled into the school after the holidays, and going the rounds.

Perhaps smuggling was not even necessary with the more lenient teachers; according to Fauré's testimony the pupils were permitted to study the operatic scores of Gluck, Mehul, Weber and Mozart, and the *mélodies* and lieder of the early to mid-nineteenth century were hardly seditious. The sternest musical guardian would have found these pieces preferable to the piano music of Liszt and operas by Wagner. Louis Niedermeyer was devoted to Fauré, whom he considered his most gifted pupil, and he is often credited with having written the first real *mélodie*. This was *Le Lac*, to a poem by Lamartine, written and published in the 1820s.

What is less known is that Niedermeyer also composed a number of more ambitious *mélodies* written shortly before his death and published by the Parisian firm of Pacini in 1862. These include a Hugo setting entitled *La Mer* (which seems an imitation of Gounod's Musset setting *Venise*, a famous song in the same key, dating from 1842) and *Ô ma belle rebelle* (again no doubt inspired by a setting of the same Baïf poem by Gounod, published in 1855). There was another Hugo setting in the Niedermeyer set published by Pacini in 1860 – this was *Puisqu'ici bas toute*

*âme*, to a poem set as a solo song by Fauré later in the 1860s and subsequently rearranged as a duet for the Viardot sisters in the 1870s.<sup>7</sup>

The earlier songs of Gounod may well have been known to Fauré (perhaps via Niedermeyer – both older composers were avid setters of Lamartine). Ravel believed that the history of the *mélodie* began with Gounod, and Fauré was clearly also struck by this composer's astonishing gift for melody as well as the generosity of spirit and musical expansiveness that are the trademarks of his benign muse. In 1922 Fauré said in an interview that Gounod had brought something new to music; this admiration is to be heard here and there in some of Fauré's early Victor Hugo settings. He came to know the older composer personally through the Viardot family in the 1870s, directly after Gounod's return to Paris from temporary exile in London. During the period of the Commune Gounod had been accommodated by the impossibly bossy Mrs Georgina



Charles Gounod (1818–1893) in later life

Weldon in Tavistock Square, and sternly persuaded to compose English songs for the benefit of her orphanage. This episode when the embodiment of French *mélodie* was more or less taken hostage in London was an unhappy prelude to Fauré's less dramatic flirtations with the English capital some twenty years later.

Saint-Saëns, who took over from Niedermeyer as Fauré's teacher and protector, was a dab hand at setting the poetry of Hugo: *Rêverie* had been published in 1852, *Le Pas d'armes du roi Jean* in 1855, and *L'Attente* and *La Cloche* in 1856. There is something marvellously organised and neat about these songs; they all display remarkable craftsmanship, and they all became well known on the concert platform. There is something to be said for the theory that the perennially energetic Saint-Saëns was the ideal composer for Hugo's relentlessly energetic texts. The medieval-inspired *Le Pas d'armes du roi Jean*, bristling with plagal cadences, contains a passage where the composer has great fun creating a churchy, medieval atmosphere with modal harmonies. At the song's climax the body of a young page, killed at a joust, is handed over to an abbot and his monks for sombre burial. This is 'special effect' music, written in a succession of ancient-looking minims, and Saint-Saëns proves himself a racier composer than Gounod in terms of pastiche. It is the theatrical, one might say operatic, side of this kind of illustrative music that was not to Fauré's taste. He was never one for narrative songs, preferring always to describe a scene (or a state of mind) encapsulated in music, as if in a single wonderful photograph, rather than by a succession of flickering, cinematic images.





Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) wearing the Légion d'Honneur

The very first of Fauré's songs, *Le Papillon et la fleur*, seems at first glance to be somewhat beholden to Saint-Saëns. In this little narrative Fauré manages a passable imitation of his teacher's scintillating style, especially in the glittering but heartless little waltz of the piano's *ritornello*; but he lacks the cynical nature of his mentor, and in the genuine emotion of the flower's entreaty, 'ne puis pas', we hear more than a touch of Gounod's sincerity. In Fauré's *Dans les ruines d'une abbaye* we may possibly ascribe the song's A major tonality, and its vivacious verbal dexterity, to the example of *Enlèvement*, a Hugo setting by Saint-Saëns composed in 1865. But Fauré suffuses his own song with a geniality and affection, a teasing warmth and melodic grace, that is lacking from his teacher's galloping scherzo. There is some of Fauré's music for solo piano that adopts the manner of Saint-Saëns's sometimes dizzying virtuosity, but we must scour Fauré's mature *mélodies* carefully, and mostly in vain, in order to find deeper signs

of Saint-Saëns's sheerly *musical* influence, notwithstanding the older composer's personal and professional impact on the life of the younger.

There is even some evidence of Saint-Saëns having set a *bad* example, and that is in the very careless prosody of the earlier Fauré songs. The performer who takes the trouble to compare the high-voice and medium-voice versions of the first *recueil* of the Hamelle edition will be puzzled to come across varied readings of the same phrase, with different accentuations on different words. As Mimi Daitz has pointed out,<sup>8</sup> a song such as *Rêve d'amour* is perplexingly rich in different readings, and Fauré, in making *post facto* adjustments to the vocal line, is not always able to resolve the central problem of having been too little concerned with prosody in the first place (it is an added drawback that, in the absence of a critical edition of the songs,<sup>9</sup> the singer is not always able to determine which of the two versions represented the composer's later thoughts).

Daitz notes that in the introduction to Saint-Saëns's collected songs in two volumes (issued by Durand in 1896) the composer confesses 'quelques négligences de style' in his own work, including faulty prosody; he excuses this on the grounds of youthful inexperience at the time of their composition. And he does not seem to have been over-fussy with his student Fauré, failing to correct the sometimes very awkward accentuations of the teenager's Hugo settings.

Sheerly in terms of harmony and texture it is the Niedermeyer songs of 1861 that seem

to have struck an ongoing chord with Fauré, although none of them has the musical wit and brilliance of Saint-Saëns. Niedermeyer's *La Mer* seems prophetic of Fauré's *Automne* (with the strength of its basses in octaves, and a sense of the drama inherent in nature); the same composer's *Puisqu'ici-bas* looks forward to Fauré's Baudelaire setting *Chant d'automne* (in its organisation in two contrasting musical sections, the second charmingly lyrical), and there is also a prophecy of the almost academic part-writing of the opening of *La Raïçon* (also Baudelaire). Niedermeyer's *Ô ma belle rebelle* points the way to the 'madrigal' style, with its quasi-lute accompaniment, that is initiated so elegantly in Fauré's early Hugo setting, still unpublished, *Puisque j'ai mis ma lèvre*.

In Niedermeyer's last songs there is a certain freedom in the use of harmony that is not to be found in Saint-Saëns's Hugo settings, which is not to say that Niedermeyer was as gifted or accomplished a composer as Saint-Saëns; there is nothing in his music that is as deftly effective as *Le Pas d'armes du roi Jean*. Nevertheless Niedermeyer's harmonic language shows here and there a subtly different way of considering how to move from one chord to the next. Even in this modest writing we have an indication of the divide between the vast majority of French composers on one hand, mostly educated at the Paris Conservatoire, and those who had the grounding in harmony enjoyed by the students at the École Niedermeyer – and this applied to Niedermeyer himself, of course. If this seems to imply two opposing schools lined up against each other in battle formation, it is very much how the establishments themselves viewed it at the time. And yet the Conservatoire produced dozens of composers, and the École Niedermeyer only two of international rank: Fauré, and André Messager. Of these, the latter was a composer of delicious operettas, so in terms of heavyweight musical achievement it is Gabriel Fauré who was left to play the role of the Niedermeyer 'David' against the 'Goliath' of the Conservatoire. Before we discuss their differences of harmonic outlook we have to go back into French musical history to find out how and why this curious rivalry came about.



The middle of the nineteenth century found France as little better than a vassal state of Germany and Italy in terms of the musical language employed by its composers: to the east, German romanticism was triumphant; to the south, Italian opera. The work of Beethoven, Schubert, Weber, Schumann and Liszt (all of whose music was known and admired in France in varying degrees) seemed to lead ineluctably to that of Wagner, whose *Tannhäuser* was eulogised by Baudelaire in 1861 and then slowly assimilated by the rest of France in succeeding decades. One of the very few substantial composers who stands outside this tradition, admired by both German and French composers, was Frédéric Chopin. The role he played in the formation of the style of such composers as Fauré and Debussy is inestimable.

During the years of the Second Empire the musical tastes of Germany and France differed enormously, particularly when it came to the French public's preference for undemanding opera and ballet over symphonic or chamber music. But the language used by most French composers was one hardly different from that employed by all the famous Germans and Italians – that is to say, a diatonic system of harmony dominated by the tonic and dominant, ever in search of a

perfect cadence. Even the use of the diminished seventh (encouraged by Weber) emphasised the dependence of harmony on a rather limited number of options. A great many musical thinkers of the time, including some in England, were becoming increasingly bored with the ubiquity of the sharpened leading note; the case against the status quo was eloquently put in England by Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, apart from being a visionary poet, was also a fine musician:

What they [i.e. the harmony experts of the time] call the key of the dominant, viz. one in which the fourth of the tonic is sharpened, I say is not the key of the dominant (which is another mode than the key of the tonic and has no leading note) but the key of the tonic misplaced and transposed ... . What he calls variety I call sameness, because modulation reduces all the rich diatonic keyboard with its six or seven authentic, not to speak of plagal, modes, to one dead level of major.<sup>10</sup>

This was an era when church music, and a nostalgia for the purities and certainties of medieval times, began to undermine (in France at least) the hegemony of the Germans in terms of harmony. The heart of this revolution was in Solesmes, a village between Le Mans and Angers, where a Benedictine abbey was the centre of a Gregorian revival. Under the guidance of Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805–1875) plainchant melodies were released from the tyranny and straitjacket of bar lines, and allowed a freedom and flexibility of performance that they had not known since the sixteenth century. Catholic churches the world over were the beneficiaries of this development, and modal harmony was once more on the agenda, once more something to be studied. This was eventually to lead to such institutions as the Chanteurs de St Gervais – from 1892 – devoted to the performance of early music under the direction of the composer Charles Bordes – and the establishment under Vincent d'Indy of the powerful Schola Cantorum in 1894.

If the study of plainchant was something relatively new, there had been a long tradition whereby church music was taken very seriously. A school founded in 1817 in Paris by Alexandre-Etienne Choron (1771–1834), the Conservatoire de Musique Classique et Religieuse, had specialised in the study and performance of the works of Palestrina and the Renaissance. This establishment was shut down in Louis-Philippe's reign, but was eventually replaced by the École Niedermeyer. In 1922 Fauré recalled his life at this school when he was a boy. The differences between his musical upbringing and that available at the Conservatoire were to shape his musical tastes for the rest of his life:

The masterpieces of J.S. Bach that constituted our daily bread, had still not found their way into the organ class at the Conservatoire; and in the pianoforte classes at the same Conservatoire the students still laboured at the performance of Herz's concertos, while Adolphe Adam shed his brilliant light on the composition class.<sup>11</sup>

We must now briefly examine what Fauré learned at the École Niedermeyer and which Adolphe Adam at the Conservatoire could never have taught him. Most of the school's students went on to a life in church music, the kind of career that Fauré *père* had expected for his son when he brought

his boy, aged nine, up to Paris in 1854. These organists and choirmasters had learned enough about modal harmony to accompany plainchant in a way that avoided placing it in the straitjacket of diatonic tonality (the fact that we now feel that plainchant is best left unaccompanied is beside the point). An important book for the development of a serious study of the church modes was *Traité théorique et pratique de l'accompagnement du plain-chant* by Joseph d'Ortigue (1857), but the harmony bible of the students at the École Niedermeyer was *Traité d'harmonie* by one of their own teachers, Gustave Lefèvre. Quite contrary to the most prevalent practices of the 1850s, this treatise returned to a system of figuring the harmony that went back to the famous theoretician Abbé Vogler (1749–1814). Vogler had taught Pierre de Maleden who had, in turn, taught Saint-Saëns. With this pedigree one understands why this particular composer–pianist had been invited to take up a teaching position at the École Niedermeyer after the founder's death.

Vogler's theory permitted chord roots on all degrees of the scale, assigning to them the Roman numerals I to VII, in large figures for a major chord, smaller figures for a minor. This system of numbering is primarily concerned with the degree of the scale on which the chord is placed. (The more familiar use of Arabic numbers in the figuring of a bass line was criticised by Lefèvre as being confusing.) Vogler's system also encompassed the enharmonic 'spellings' of diminished seventh and augmented sixth chords to illustrate tonal paths from a given centre to any other major or minor key. One of the first tasks for the student of Lefèvre's book was to study the different functions of a chord. An E minor triad was printed (E–G–B in the treble clef), and then this same chord was differently numbered according to its context: i in the key of E minor, iii in the key of C major, ii in the key of D major, and iv in the key of B minor. The students had then to practise with these chords in transpositions. All chords on all degrees of the minor and major scales (with only a handful of exceptions) were permitted as valid harmonies. Alteration of triads for modulatory purposes, using sharps and flats, was allowed not only on the fifth degree, but also on the third and first degree of the scale (see Example 1.1).



Example 1.1 Four triads from Gervais, *Étude comparée des langues harmoniques*, p. 55

In this way of teaching harmony, all these chords were permitted in themselves, but fascinating avenues opened up for movement *from* these triads via the altered notes; in the example printed above, E $\natural$  (in a C major chord) has slid up to E $\sharp$ , and A $\natural$  (in F $\sharp$  minor) has fallen to A $\flat$ ; likewise G $\natural$  (in C minor) has fallen to G $\flat$ , and G $\natural$  in a C major chord has been lifted to G $\sharp$ . This is an indication of how Fauré was encouraged to think about harmony in a completely different way from that of most of his contemporaries. The rule was that 'every consonant or dissonant chord can be modified by alterations to the notes that compose it'. Lefèvre's extraordinary liberality in relation to procedures that might be termed modulatory by others, but which he himself would have regarded as non-modulatory, opens a door for us on the whole of Fauré's harmonic outlook. Here is a crucial Lefèvre command: 'you must explore the directions in which every note of the chord can move, either diatonically, chromatically or enharmonically, so as to form a new

aggregation. You can then assign this to a certain key depending on how you designate the notes that compose it.<sup>12</sup> Nectoux spells out the implications of this way of thinking about harmony:

In a C major chord the E can be considered as itself, the G as an F double sharp, an appoggiatura of G sharp, and the C as an appoggiatura of B natural. From here the chord can move either to B major, E major or G sharp major. According to this principle every chord can be thought of as consisting both of 'true' notes and 'artificial' notes.<sup>13</sup>

In this system one has simply to choose how to interpret any given chord and engineer a resolution that conforms with that interpretation. For the teachers of harmony at the Conservatoire, this Niedermeyer-approved system represented unacceptable anarchy. In the conventional dispensation every alteration to a chord implied a change of tonality, but the Lefèvre approach took into account how people heard music, not only how they read it or analysed it. The introduction to the song *Les Présents*, for example (see Chapter 7), rocks sensuously between F major (the opening bar) and A $\flat$  major, with D $\sharp$ s instead of D $\flat$ s (second bar). The pivotal note of C is the dominant of F major as well as the mediant of A $\flat$  major. Lefèvre would have taught that the piece was simply in F major and the chord in the second bar was based on the flattened third.

As it turned out, Fauré was the only one of the Niedermeyer pupils to evolve a rich and rewarding idiom derived from a broadened knowledge of harmony that included the church and antique modes, combined with the liberal attitudes to diatonic harmony espoused by Lefèvre. He was not at all interested in using the modes as the basis of an entire piece; neither was he attracted by using them, like Saint-Saëns in his *Le Pas d'armes du roi Jean*, for the kind of illustrative colour that we now associate with film scores. Fauré was not principally drawn to modal harmony because it made his music sound atmospheric, or historically archaic; instead, he gradually drew the modes deep into his musical vocabulary because they broadened his options in moving inventively, ingeniously, from one harmony to the next. This also improved his capacity to invent melody, despite the fact that his melodic inventions were always linear.

'His tonalities, clear as they are, sometimes are established very quickly and for a passing moment only – a practice observed in the sixteenth century and favoured by familiarity with the ancient modes, because they allow greater flexibility in modulation.'<sup>14</sup> Thus wrote Charles Koechlin, but Fauré would probably not have labelled what he was doing as modulation – he could have demonstrated how he found his way to these so-called 'modulations' by viewing his progress within the home key through his own harmonic spectacles, a pathway rich in exploratory possibility and harmonic allusion. He had become accustomed to this richness early on; the flexibility of the modes was to open the doors of an Aladdin's cave of harmony to a youngster who remained in possession of this treasure for the rest of his life. By the very nature of the acquisition of this language, and in the absence of another genius within the École Niedermeyer who had been educated in the same way, Fauré's solution was bound to appear singular and unusual. It is no wonder that *pasticheurs*, past and present, lack the easy means to copy him, for despite its logicity his is an elusive language that no one else speaks, or has ever spoken, fluently or quite fluently enough.

If Louis Niedermeyer had been responsible for teaching Fauré that modern harmony could be

expanded to accommodate the antique modes, it was Fauré, and only Fauré, who was responsible for the development of this idiosyncratic cause into great art. Saint-Saëns's lessons with his teacher Maladen might have yielded a similarly revolutionary response, but they failed to do so; it was only Fauré who was both willing and able to make the synthesis. From this stems much of the composer's uniqueness. For example, one must look at his harmonic progressions horizontally rather than vertically – this is because his very melodic sense is harmonic, and when he writes a melody it is so tied up with the harmonisation of that melody that it is virtually impossible to separate the strands of the composer's creative impulse. As Nadia Boulanger observes 'The harmony of Fauré and the harmony of Debussy are radically different. Harmony, for Fauré is an element of design, whereas Debussy tends to conceive it rather as a source of colour.'<sup>15</sup>

A person who comes to Fauré for the first time must learn that the twists and turns of this music are the result of the exercise of choice, as exquisite and refined a process of conscious deliberation as ever went into the making of a work of art. And the performer must realise that Fauré saw his songs as being all of a piece, that what may be regarded as modulations by other people are never red herrings which may be used to compartmentalise a piece of music and divide it into sections. This richness of harmony is the result of crystal-clear logic where the song progresses from the beginning to its end in a single *courbe* of thought and sound.

There are many signposts in the music that are noticeable without a deep knowledge of harmony. Even the neophyte singer and player will register the tritones in the melodic line of *Lydia*; they will note the refusal of the vocal line to rise to a sharpened leading note of the key in *La Lune blanche*, and that, in remaining flattened, this seventh gives the song a character that is unlike any other setting of those words; they may even notice that the *Prima verba* from *La Chanson d'Ève* is written entirely in modal style, without being able to identify this as Mixolydian, and that the left hand of the accompaniment of *Mandoline* is given vibrant life by a succession of unprepared chords of the major seventh. These are just a few of the thousands of such exquisite details in the songs. These never appear, or sound, as revolutionary as they actually are – the effect is of something subtly modified and enriched, and yet the whole Beethovenian system of harmony has been subverted. Proof of just how radically the composer's broom has swept through the fields of harmony is the fact that Fauré's music is almost impossible to sight-read. The unprepared pianist's fingers, after being used to playing the Viennese classics, go automatically into keyboard grooves that often prove to be the wrong ones. One can never second-guess where Fauré's harmonic imagination is taking him, any more than one can second-guess Bach. Nadia Boulanger described the fascination exerted by this composer's harmonic world:

Fauré etches in even the most subtle of his modulations with the sharp, fine lines of a pen. You never know to what key he is leading you, but when you reach your tonal destination, there is never any doubt as to its location. Indeed, you feel almost as though it would have been impossible to have gone elsewhere and you wonder only at the beauty of the voyage and the skill of your guide who, in coming, has led you so quickly and surely through so many lands. The subtlety of Fauré's transitory modulations, the ease and naturalness with which he alludes to the most remote keys, are the mind's sheerest delight.<sup>16</sup>

In the early songs there is less evidence of this feeling for a mode-enriched harmonic vocabulary. What Fauré had learned at the school was clearly stored at the back of his mind, and it began to be heard in earnest almost halfway through the songs of the first *recueil* (this word simply means ‘collection’ and refers to the publication of sixty of Fauré’s songs – three *recueils* of twenty songs each – by the Parisian publishing house of Hamelle). As the years went by, he felt more confident in being able to draw on what he had understood about harmony and its possibilities since he was a teenager. At first it seemed more important to write songs to please other people – publishers such as Choudens and Hartmann, teachers such as Saint-Saëns and patrons such as Pauline Viardot. He was clever enough to understand the potential of his treasury of harmony, but he did not yet have the confidence to display those riches openly. But gradually he threw off the shackles of an imagined propriety to walk boldly into his destiny as a bringer of harmony in every sense; by the time he embarked on *La Bonne chanson* he was able to flex his chordal muscles in a way that was simply beyond the ability (and one must also say the inclination) of any other French composer. This success depended on another imponderable: the composer’s response to words, and his increasing ability over a long career to inhabit a poem with rare sensibility and bring it to musical life. Without that extra talent, all the harmonic gifts in the world could not have turned Fauré into a great song composer. That this response was of a subtly different kind from that of the great lieder composers is discussed more fully in Chapter 15.



Fauré’s sarcasm about the quality of teaching at the old Conservatoire (Adam shedding ‘his ‘brilliant light’) is a tiny indication of the barbed rivalry that existed between the two institutions. Fauré’s education at the École Niedermeyer counted against him when his candidacy for the professorship of composition at the Conservatoire was blocked by its director, Ambroise Thomas, in 1892. But it is paradoxical that Fauré’s eventual surprise appointment as director of the Conservatoire in 1905 was also, in part, thanks to his being an outsider. At the time the uncertainties of the political climate, including the possibility of anarchist revolt, and the shadow of *l’affaire Dreyfus*, made the men at the ministry look favourably on Fauré’s independent background. He had kept his distance both from the internecine struggles for power at the Conservatoire and from the Schola Cantorum, the latter a stronghold of right-wing Catholic allegiance. This was at a time when the Third Republic was determined to keep the powers of Church and State separate. In 1905 Fauré’s reputation for integrity promised a ‘new broom’ at the Conservatoire, which the composer duly provided. By then musicologists had begun to study composers whose music had scarcely been heard in modern times; attendance at the lectures given on music history at the Conservatoire by the famous scholar (and less famous composer) Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray (1840–1910) was made obligatory for all students by Fauré when he took up the directorship of the institution.

Looking back at the past was one source of renewal, and certainly the most important at the École Niedermeyer. But outside the walls of that institution there were other rejuvenating influences. If on one hand there was a growing interest in music from former times, in France there has always been an appetite for the new and the exotic; it was to be expected that composers would seek for some kind of release from what had become the boring sameness of the German-

dominated musical landscape. The new field of ethnomusicology was awakened by music from far-away lands, not as yet a serious study of folksong, but as a fascination with local colour (one thinks of the scrupulously annotated artistic explorations of the Napoleonic age and the Empire style in clothes and furniture inspired by Egypt). More than half a century before Debussy was entranced by the music of the gamelan, Félicien David composed his *Mélodies orientales* (1835). The study of the music of the ancients also played its part: with *Lydia* (c.1870), Fauré chose a poem inspired by the purity of ancient Greece, and set it in a modal manner designed to evoke similarly ancient music. Saint-Saëns also deplored the ascendancy of the major and minor keys (while showing little sign of abandoning them in his own music); he welcomed the revival of the antique modes, and of the immense variety of the oriental ones. He felt assured that a new art would be born of this diversity. His cycle *Mélodies persanes* (1872) is not a truly innovative work in terms of harmony, but it does use effective splashes of oriental colour, as does his opera *La Princesse jaune* (also 1872) with its quasi-Japanese flavour. Bizet's one-act opera *Djamileh* is another oriental evocation from the same year. The cover of the first edition of Fauré's song *Seule!* (1871), with Istanbul's Hagia Sophia in the background, shows a contemporary fascination with a world of mosques and minarets. Ravel would compose his *Shéhérazade* in 1898 – a fairy-tale overture as a tribute to this enduring fad for orientalism – and of course his great song cycle with orchestral accompaniment of the same name in 1903. The single Fauré *mélodie* influenced by this passion for orientalism is *Les Roses d'Ispahan* of 1884 – a song that evokes Western delight in Eastern luxury from the first notes of its languorous introduction.

The Germans sought to escape the tyranny of dominant-tonic harmony by using an increasingly complex chromaticism – as in the works of Wagner, Strauss and later Schoenberg. A number of French composers followed this line of thought (many of them were disciples of Wagner, an influence that can be seen at some stage or other in their works), but there had been a long-established tradition of the study of modal harmony that gave to French music a flavour of its own. Berlioz in some of his music made use of the medieval modes, and these were also explored by Liszt and composers of the modern Russian school.

It was César Franck (1822–1890) who first attempted to combine modal writing with a quasi-Wagnerian chromaticism. He stayed more attached to the home key than Wagner, but he enlarged the field of his modulations with a fondness for *enchaînements* based on the common notes between two distant keys. His use of plagal cadences and passages of Gregorian-inspired modality bring a special, rather perfumed, colour to his style. Franckian disciples such as D'Indy and Chausson continued on this pathway in their own manner. If these had been the only examples for Fauré to follow he might have become an arch-conservative like his teacher Saint-Saëns, or another of the ardent Wagnerians.

There were at least two other composers, each of stunning individuality, whose music showed Fauré in his twenties that it was possible for a French composer to forge a style entirely of his own. The first of these was his older contemporary Georges Bizet (1838–1875), the majority of whose fine songs with piano were published between 1865 and 1868 when Fauré was employed as an organist in Rennes, in Brittany (see Chapter 3). *Carmen* was first performed in 1875 at a time when the younger composer was taken up with the Viardot family (see Chapter 4). The other composer



was Emmanuel Chabrier (1841–1894), whose more important songs were published in Fauré's own maturity, but whose operetta, the almost universally admired *L'Étoile* (1877), must have made some impression on Fauré in a rather directionless period of his life. Both of these composers were capable of extreme harmonic audacity and refinement; Bizet and Chabrier were deeply serious, while being capable of humour; both were bold, and at the same time delicate.

Bizet was first and foremost a man of the theatre, as was Chabrier – temperamentally they were both a long way from Fauré with his penchant for piano music, songs and chamber music. But they belonged to no school, and they were both moderns without subscribing to the current



Georges Bizet (1838–1875)

Wagnerian mania (Chabrier and Fauré both knew and loved their Wagner through and through, and laughed at the music at the same time; both wrote piano duets parodying Wagnerian operatic themes). Bizet was a rebellious product of the Conservatoire; he died believing that his masterpiece, *Carmen*, was a failure, and that success had eluded him to the last. Chabrier, the lovable auto-didact from the Auvergne, had nothing to do with the Conservatoire: he had taken private lessons in Paris but evolved his own, strikingly individual, musical language. Much of his musical career ran parallel to that of Fauré's first period without the two composers influencing each other in the slightest. That two such great (and utterly different) composers should exist at the same time in Paris is no less remarkable, indeed no less a sign of the musical richness of the epoch, than the more famous later synchronicity of Fauré and Debussy, and of Debussy and Ravel.



It is all too easy to talk about Fauré as a composer 'apart' in sheerly musical or historical terms without considering aspects of his personality and private life. Great composers are by definition a 'success': because we would not wish their music to be different we would also refrain from changing details in their biography, had we the power to do so. It is clear that whatever shaped Fauré's life and mind we, the listeners, are the grateful beneficiaries. Nevertheless, even great composers are subject to crucial, and sometimes unfortunate, early experiences, where a different set of circumstances might have produced a different person, and thus arguably different music. This book will attempt such an hypothesis on behalf of Fauré only from the point of view



*Emmanuel Chabrier (1841–1894)*

of an observation that arises from reading the facts on the very first page of his biography, a reminder that the composer was born into a Dickensian age in terms of bringing up children.

Gabriel was the last of six, fifteen years younger than the eldest – possibly an unwanted child. His birth had not been planned, according to the pianist Marguerite Long.<sup>17</sup> She must have heard the composer refer to this when he reminisced about his childhood – he already in his sixties, and she still a student. Fauré's thirty-six-year-old mother, exhausted by childbearing, was simply unable to cope with the new arrival. Of the stresses and strains in her life we have no idea. The child was consigned to a wet-nurse in a neighbouring village of Verniolle, where he spent the first four years of his life with a foster family. After this he lived with his own mother and father during the school year, but as his siblings were older he remained a solitary

child who spent enormous stretches of time on his own – he effectively brought himself up, it seems. In each of the summers of 1849 to 1854 he returned to live with his foster family, and he was dispatched to school far away in Paris at the age of nine.

Fauré himself never complained about this; indeed, he would have thought such a train of events completely unremarkable; in later years there were large stretches of time when he saw little of his own children, and yet he was extremely fond of them. In the twenty-first century we are more aware of the emotional damage unwittingly inflicted by busy or distracted parents. At the other end of the spectrum there is no doubt that the emotional development of Saint-Saëns was blighted by an obsessively controlling mother and aunt who fussed and worried over every aspect of the composer's life well into his middle age. With Fauré's parents there was no such danger, and the quality of affection he received from his stand-in mother (we know very little about her in contrast to Chabrier's beloved 'Nanine', a substitute that 'worked') would have been crucial to his development – it was perhaps from his nanny in Verniolle that he learned hope and patience. She was astounded to learn of his musical gifts – and deeply disappointed: 'There I was hoping he would be a bishop,' she groaned.<sup>18</sup>

We might wonder whether a failure of bonding between mother and son resulted in Gabriel's lifelong lack of self-esteem, as well as the early development of a self-protective shell (whereby

‘nothing matters’) to shield him from the pain of that rejection. Such a child often escapes from a low sense of self-worth by becoming someone else in his own mind, someone impervious to rejection, someone who falls back on any talents he may possess to explore his own fantasy world where he is a ‘someone’. Fauré was thought to be a silent and self-contained little boy, and no wonder – but once his musical gift had emerged it was a matter of family discussion and approbation – he had proved himself very different from his elder brothers and sister. As Nicholas Spice has pointed out this can seem a saving grace for an otherwise unremarkable child, but it is not always healthy:

To be good at music as a child is not always an unmixed blessing. It brings complications that may take a lifetime to smooth out ... A child who is spoken to by music will quickly learn to speak through music. This is what adults call talent, and it entrances them ... Musical ability draws down onto the child the approval of the adult world to an immoderate degree. This can be a source of deep ambiguity. On the one hand it’s great for the child to feel valued and to have a way of establishing an identity with peers and siblings. On the other hand, the child may come partly to believe that he is only valued for his music and not for who he is.<sup>19</sup>

An ‘indifference to success’ and a disdain for praise can be the result of a childhood armoured against what the child perceives, rightly or wrongly, as an absence of love – and when love or success comes in later life it seems undeserved, not to be trusted, indistinguishable from blame. Fauré’s lifelong obsession with a passing parade of amorous female companionship might be considered another consequence of this early deprivation; he loved women, everyone knew that, but whether he allowed them, or trusted them, to love him back is another matter. Did Fauré’s wet-nurse have a rich and low speaking or singing voice? If so the composer’s propensity for the mezzo-soprano timbre in composing his songs would be entirely understandable.

In some respects the way in which the infant Fauré was dispatched to the next village to grow up and develop apart was reflected in his position within the French family of musicians; his education at the École Niedermeyer, also a school very much apart, simply reinforced this sense of distance from his colleagues and rivals. If the badge of distance was initially painful the ingenious child had a way of adapting to pain – it became the badge of pride. He acquired a substantially new musical language from that of other composers, not merely as a hapless result of having gone to a different school, but because it was essential to his survival that he should remove himself from direct competition with his contemporaries and rivals – his musical siblings, if you like. In this we discern a conflict of self-evaluations: on one hand a feeling that he was unlovable, thus undeserving of success, indeed deserving of failure, and on the other a certainty of excellence within a long-built citadel of quiet defiance, a superiority so obvious to the composer himself that there was no need to have it put to the test. In this way the co-existence of a crushing lack of confidence and a lofty grandiosity is hardly surprising. ‘Olympian’ is an adjective that was applied to Fauré’s demeanour more than once in his career, but at heart he was anything but that. In his emotive life we find a similar conflict: with very few exceptions he found it difficult to sustain relationships over any length of time that required him truly to share anything of his ‘worthless’ inner self while an outer facade of sexually persuasive charm ensured the conquering of pastures new, the latter

leading to a succession of liaisons of self-defeating pointlessness. The fact that his relationship with his wife survived (although certainly not sexually) seems to have been thanks to her dysfunctional upbringing as much as his; both feared intimacy, although with time they developed a remarkable epistolary substitute at arms' length. Like two wounded birds they remained in the same coop without realising that (to adopt an old witticism) in their marrying, two people were made miserable instead of four.<sup>20</sup> It would seem that Fauré and his wife were, entirely by chance, rather well suited to each other; she called herself the 'zero of the family' – a phrase that sums up how the last and unwanted child of Toussaint and Hélène Fauré, whatever his fame, must have felt, even if only subconsciously, about his own position in his own family hierarchy – apart of course from his sovereign musical talent, and therein lies the conflict. A photograph taken in 1878 shows Fauré with his elder brothers Albert, Amand and Fernand; he was extremely fond of them but such family gatherings could scarcely make good the deprivations of a small boy thirty years earlier.



*His basic aim was not to become a public figure or get involved in being a revolutionary or a founding father; it was quite simply to develop his gifts and remain faithful to his own deeply held principles.*

Jean-Michel Nectoux<sup>21</sup>

One can scarcely imagine what Fauré would have done, what he might have become, if he had not been able to live out his life in music. But if he had been able only to write music in the manner of Saint-Saëns, or even Massenet, one wonders whether he would have stayed the course. He needed the protection that the exclusivity of this musical language afforded him; it was his magic shield, the thing that ensured he was *hors de combat* in comparison with other composers, his own quiet way of removing himself from being compared with anyone else. Within the capsule of his own musical language he was, and remains, inviolate. He was one of those people who prefer to be ignored completely, rather than to find themselves demeaned by being ranked within a hierarchy. When viewed in this way, the composer's famous disinclination to push himself forward was not merely the result of a self-defeating humility; it may also be seen as a kind of inverse pride where he refused to plead for the merits of something that was self-evidently superior to the work of his rivals – or at least its superiority *should* have been self-evident if people only had the ears to comprehend.

At times it seems that the composer has made a posthumous breakthrough and that more and more people are recognising his greatness; at others one feels that his listeners will always be in the minority. That few people seem to have the necessary ears to understand him completely is perceived by some as the tragedy of Fauré's life and work, both when he was alive and even today, but the composer himself might not have seen it as such. His exclusivity, even inaccessibility, was something that became curiously positive and even necessary for his own comfort, his own self-image. It suited him to have appeared to come from nowhere, like a changeling, and when he died he went back into nowhere with the imperturbable shrug of the shoulders that reminds us of Thomas Hardy, who believed in the intervention of chance in human fate, and contended

in one of his late poems that in never having asked for much he was not disappointed at the end of his days with not having received much.<sup>22</sup> For those who know and love both the poetry of Hardy and the music of Fauré there is an impervious doughtiness and self-sufficiency that link these two near-contemporaries. In the loneliness of their great art in old age they reached ineffable depths of expression through prodigious feats of concision: both were honoured, revered and (within four years of each other) given state funerals by so-called grateful governments that had little idea of the enduring scope of their achievements; both died without a successor in sight.

It seems part of some kind of sad inevitability in the Fauréan chronicle that both his sons should die childless, and that there has been no Wagnerian succession or a battle between heirs. He had no spiritual heirs either: grateful students and admirers a-plenty, all with different kinds of creative ideals, but no one who could continue the work of the Master where he had left off.<sup>23</sup>



Fauré remained completely uninvolved with the tide of music that was being composed in the year of his death – Janáček's *The Cunning little Vixen*, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, Satie's *Relâche*, Ravel's *Tzigane*, Stravinsky's Piano Sonata – what did all this have to do with him, including the piece by Ravel, who had once been his pupil? Similarly it was no fault of his own that Wagner's *Lohengrin* and Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* were composed in the year of his birth. Even during his life he remained distant from Bizet's *Carmen* or Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*; he must have known these works rather well, but they stand so far away from Fauré's own that they seem to exist merely in a kind of parallel universe, written not only without his having lifted a finger, but also without his scarcely having lent an ear. Stravinsky remembers seeing Fauré at a performance of *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913 (the older composer possessed a copy of the work in its piano duet version) and the score of *Pierrot Lunaire*, lent to him by Émile Vuillermoz, gave him a sleepless night – as if he had consumed an indigestible meal.

None of the above-mentioned works, iconic as they are, had the power to touch and change a note of Fauré's legacy. Nothing by any composer since Fauré put down his pen has rendered anything he has written obsolete or old-fashioned; nothing has rendered it easier to understand either. No more recent music has made Fauré's appear more accessible than when it was first written, but nothing composed since he died has made it sound dated and passé either. As for listeners (or performers), the composer will do nothing, beyond the gift of his music, to beg or persuade them into loving or even admiring him; this was never his way.



J.-M. Nectoux prefaces his smaller volume on the composer, *Fauré*,<sup>24</sup> with a poem by Mallarmé (set by Ravel, not by Fauré) entitled 'Sainte'. These beautiful and evocative lines form a hymn to the patron saint of music, and Nectoux clearly intends that Mallarmé's words 'Musicien de silence' ('Musician of Silence') should be read with reference to Fauré himself, as well as St Cecilia.

In a similar way the reader of this book is asked to turn to page 290 and read the poem entitled 'Le Don silencieux' – 'The silent gift'. The quality of silence mentioned by Mallarmé is once again