

Fauré's Requiem – A Reader's Digest

By Adam Hope

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was a French composer, teacher, organist and conductor. He composed for the church, but a large body of his oeuvre is secular, and includes piano music, songs, chamber music, and orchestral works. Fauré was a musician of both the Romantic and Modern periods, and he embodies a musical transition. In his training, he was influenced and educated by the great Romantics such as Saint-Saëns, Chopin and Liszt, but as he matured, his style spoke of something modern, forward-thinking, and progressive. We find in Fauré a genius of synthesis; he was able to reconcile opposing elements, merging the old with the new and creating a sound-world entirely his own.

The *Requiem* is probably Fauré's best known work, and is a piece of extraordinary craftsmanship. It is a manifestation, in musical form, of his Christian faith. It is noteworthy that Fauré's personal view of Christianity is expressed through the optimism and hope that he pours out through the music. Turning from the dogma of darkness and separation, Fauré seeks to embody in his music a Christianity that is fundamentally good natured; a Christianity full of light and hope.

The work opens on a sobering and austere tone; the *Introit*, preceding the Requiem proper, is a portal into Fauré's theological statement, which is set to be delivered throughout the work. The *Introit* segues to the first thematic movement: the *Kyrie*. Musically and emotionally, there are some moments of tremendous anguish in the *Kyrie*; at 'Christe Eleison' (Christ, have mercy), Fauré uses as much dissonance as is available to him (within the confines of his tonality) to express the deep and visceral petition of this ancient Orthodox prayer.

Despite his desire to deliver a hopeful vision of Christianity, Fauré could not avoid setting the *Dies irae* (Day of wrath), because it is obligatory – at least, it was in Fauré's time – in a Mass for the Dead. It is tumultuous and haunting, manifesting the terror and upheaval of the apocalypse. However, relief is provided from the darkness and terror of this movement by the prayerful, pious *Libera me* which bookends it.

In the *Offertoire*, Fauré's masterful counterpoint is on show. Notice how the parts proceed in canon, one imitating the other; always 'dux et comes' (leader and follower) to use the correct musical terminology. The mood of the *Offertoire* is deeply unsettled; unusual modulations, angular intervals, and irregular rhythmic treatment all leave a question mark hanging over the atmosphere. But then! What relief in the form of the tender and hopeful *Hostias et preces* ('Sacrifice and prayers, we offer thee, O Lord') delivered by the Baritone solo. By comparison to the opening of the *Offertoire*, it is settled, regular, and reassuring. A return of the chorus with another supplication of 'O Domine, Jesu Christe' reminds us of the opening tone, but we are relieved as the movement finishes with a serene and fluid 'Amen' in the heavenly key of B major.

The *Pie Jesu* (more a Largo than the given Adagio) is intimate and prayerful. It expresses piety in a most deep and loving way. It feels personal; an intimate moment in which one imagines Fauré himself speaking of his own faith.

The *Agnus Dei*, a tremendously uplifting musical moment, is a real masterstroke; representing the most intimate part of the Roman Catholic Mass, the gateway to heaven is opened with this unforgettable theme which pours hope and joy into the heart. In a dramatic moment, there is a change of mood as Fauré segues back into the first theme of the work from the *Introit*, in the dark key of D minor. But the darkness is once again relieved by Fauré, as he softens the mood by concluding with a beautiful coda, featuring the theme of the *Agnus* in D major.

We've already touched on the *Libera me*; with its baritone solo, it is a noble and subtly confident prayer of supplication. 'Deliver me...' the soloist petitions, as if mimicking the plea of the soul in its hour of passing from one world to the next. The *Requiem* concludes with the seraphic *In Paradisum*; an ending which depicts a heavenly image, with visions of angels and paradise.

Fauré's artistic genius shines in his use of light and shade throughout the work. The juxtaposition of darkness and light, which he paints so effortlessly with his musical brush, is played out through tonality, key, harmony, dynamics, structure, and mood. The whole work can be summed-up as the quintessential Christian narrative; that is, the struggle between good and evil. The journey is from the very first to the very last note; the dark, empty opening in D minor, to the floating ascent into heaven with the fluttering notes at the end of the *In Paradisum* in the contrasting key of D major, as the soul makes its final journey to its resting place.