Gabriel Fauré

Requiem, op. 48 (1888)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was born the youngest of a schoolmaster’s six children in southern France. His native abilities drew him to the attention of Louis Niedermeyer in Paris, who agreed to enroll him in his newly founded École de Musique. There, a nineteen-year-old faculty member, Camille Saint-Saëns, undertook tutelage of the nine-year-old Fauré. After serving in the infantry in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Fauré became assistant to Charles-Marie Widor at Saint-Sulpice and to Saint-Saëns at the famed L’Église de la Madeleine, succeeding Dubois and Saint-Saëns. Appointed professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire in 1896, Faure was named director in 1905, a post he held until deafness forced his retirement in 1920. As a teacher, Fauré passed on to his students, including Nadia Boulanger, Maurice Ravel, and Florent Schmitt, the French idiomatic genre he learned from Saint-Saëns, thus influencing a generation of composers in holding their own against the bombastic Wagnerian influences of the day.

Fauré began writing the Requiem shortly after the death of his father in 1885. By the time of its first performance at the Madeleine on January 16, 1888 (for the funeral of a distinguished parishioner) his mother had also died. While some have suggested the Requiem was a memorial to his parents, the composer clearly stated otherwise in a March 1910 letter. “My Requiem was composed for nothing . . . for the pleasure of it, if I may say so!”

Three Versions: Evolution of the Requiem

His original score (1888) had five movements. The chamber orchestra version with two additional movements—the Offertorium and Libera me—dates to 1893. The third, or symphonic, edition was premiered in July 1900 at the Palais du Trocadéro. The chamber orchestra edition is performed in this concert.

Eschewing the terrors of eternal judgment in favor of comforting reassurance for those who mourn, Fauré selected texts from the traditional Requiem Mass and In Paradisum, an antiphon from the Burial Office.

Nadia Boulanger’s Commentary on the Requiem

Program notes for the 1938 Boston premiere were drawn from Boulanger’s remembrances of Fauré in La Revue Musicale (October 1922, vol. 3, no. 11, 104-11).

“He seems to have conceived religion rather in the manner of St. John or St. Francis of Assisi than St. Bernard, or Bossuet. He looks for and finds in it a source of love and not of fear. This must be accepted if he is to be understood. The religious voice of the musician seems to interpose between Heaven and mankind; generally peaceful, quiet, and fervent, it is grave at times, and sorrowful. Menacing or dramatic—never. Liberated from an excess that would be inappropriate and undesired, it moves with devotion and tenderness in a demure quiet, as if incense-laden…. “When his voices are combined, they vivify the great vaults of our Gothic cathedrals; when they sing separately, one is moved to think of the elect of Bourges, of the saint long and slim one sees at Chartres; the gentle and smiling angels of Rheims . . . .

“The Requiem is not only one of the greatest works of Gabriel Fauré, but also one of those which do most honor to music and thought. Nothing has been written which is purer, clearer in definition. I shall be forgiven for refraining from an analysis which must pause before every measure if an attempt were made to capture all its points; moreover, this Mass for the Dead, so especially conceived, carries with it a feeling of its own that renders technical terms futile. Certainly his musical web, his architecture, his reason and order, are the essential causes of his sovereign beauty…. “But it is where these attributes end, admirable as they are, that the real Requiem begins. No exterior effect alters its sober and rather severe expression of grief, no restlessness troubles its deep meditation, no doubt stains its spotless faith, its gentle confidence, its tender and tranquil expectancy…. “If anything could truly mitigate for us the thought of death, it would be the image of hope, of serenity, which he has made for us.”