

About the Music...

by Alan M. Rothenberg

Requiem

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Gabriel Fauré's musical talent emerged early. The son of a provincial schoolteacher, at the age of nine he began formal music training at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, a school devoted to training church musicians. His teachers included Camille Saint-Saëns, who became a close friend. During his time at the Niedermeyer school, Fauré wrote what has become his best-known choral work, the *Cantique de Jean Racine*. After graduating from the school in 1865 he became a church organist, teacher, and composer, although his compositions brought him little income. In 1896 he began teaching composition at the Paris Conservatory; his students included Maurice Ravel and Naida Boulanger. He became the head of the conservatory, instigating numerous administrative reforms and broadening the curriculum to include more recent composers, including Wagner and Debussy. His compositions started getting notice, and Fauré's frequent travels brought him into contact with many of the major composers of the early twentieth century, including Edward Elgar, Richard Strauss, and Aaron Copland. Fauré retired from the conservatory in 1920 and died four years later.

Fauré began composing the Requiem in 1886. According to the composer, he was not prompted by the death of his parents. In a letter to another composer, he wrote "my Requiem wasn't written for anything—for pleasure, if I may call it that!" The first version, completed in early 1888, included only five movements: *Introit and Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, *Pie Jesu*, *Agnus Dei*, and *In Paradisum*. He added the *Offertoire* in 1889; the *Libera me*, written as an independent piece around 1877, was also incorporated. Fauré called this 1893 seven-movement version, using a small orchestra without violins, the "Church version." Neither of these versions were published. In 1901, at the request of his publisher, he (or more likely one of his students) expanded the orchestration to include the typical orchestra's instrumental complement and published a "Concert version." It is this last version heard on tonight's concert.

The Requiem is a particularly gentle setting that reflects the composer's view of death. He wrote, "My Requiem has been said to express no fear of death; it has been called a lullaby of death. But that is how I feel about death; a joyful deliverance, an aspiration towards a happiness beyond the grave, rather than as a painful experience." Fauré omits the *Dies Irae*, the description of the Day of Judgement that at the hands of Verdi and Berlioz becomes operatic drama. He includes *Libera me* and *In Paradisum*, both of which come from the traditional burial service.

There are parallels to Brahms' equally unique Requiem: there are seven movements, one of which is set for a solo soprano (*Pie Jesu*). The second and sixth movements are for solo baritone and chorus with the remaining movements for chorus. Fauré sets the words carefully, making sure that words of direct prayer can be heard clearly. The influence of plainchant is evident in the arching vocal lines. The reduced orchestra adds to the sense of restrained dignity that pervades the piece. Musicologist Melvin Berger noted that many composers write Requiem settings that are "huge, overwhelming cathedrals of sound designed to overcome doubt and deepen faith. By comparison, Fauré fashioned an exquisite, intimate, candlelit side chapel where warmth and deeply felt emotion are allowed to bring peace and solace."

Choral Fantasy in C Minor, Op. 80

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Completed in 1808. About the same time—1807: First passenger railway established in South Wales, England. Ignaz Pleyel opens his pianoforte factory in Paris. 1808: Goethe “Faust.” Harvard University forms its own orchestra, first in the US to do so. 1809: Robert Fulton patents the steamboat.

In the early part of the 19th century, it was common for a composer to present an *academie*—an extended concert designed to introduce new works and to earn money from the ticket sales. Beethoven wrote the Choral Fantasy specifically as the grand finale to his December 1808 *academie* concert held in Vienna. But the piece generated little enthusiasm, not surprising since the concert included the first performances of the Fifth Symphony, the Sixth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, three movements from the Mass in C, and a few other pieces. By the time the Choral Fantasy was performed, the audience had endured four hours of unfamiliar music performed by an under-rehearsed orchestra in an unheated theater on a bitterly cold night. The piece was composed hurriedly, probably in less than a week. At the first performance, Beethoven, at the piano, improvised the opening solo and wrote it down some time later. Even the text is of uncertain authorship. Beethoven himself said that it was written quickly, independently of the music, and later suggested that his publisher could substitute a different text if desired.

In spite of the haste with which it was composed, sketches show that Beethoven had been contemplating the unprecedented idea of an essentially orchestral composition with a choral finale since 1800 and had already decided to use the melody of *Gegenliebe*, a song he composed in 1796. A difficult piece to classify, the Fantasy seems much like a piano concerto in miniature. The extended solo and quiet orchestral entrance that opens the piece is reminiscent of the Fourth Concerto. Shortly after the full orchestra enters, the piano sounds the *Gegenliebe* melody, and a series of variations complete the piece. The final variation brings in the chorus, and it becomes apparent this piece eventually became part of the inspiration for Beethoven’s ground-breaking Ninth Symphony.

Text:

Soft, sweet and lovely are the sounds of life’s harmonies,
And awareness of their beauty brings flowers that eternally bloom.
Peace and friendship are sweetly blended, like the rhythm of the waves.
All that is ugly and uncouth is sublimated.

When the magical sounds are heard and the soul awakes,
Then man moves heavenward, night and storms turned to light.
Calm without and joy within, in the bliss for which we long.
Art and springtime brings light to us all.

The heart is filled with great joy when encountering beauty,
When the spirit exalts, a chorus of spirits resounds.
Receive the joy and all its blessings without hesitation.
When love and power unite, man earns the gods’ approval