

DLA Dissertation Abstract

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**Interpretative possibilities in Gabriel
Fauré's late nocturnes**

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I. Background

There is a notable gap in the Hungarian-language literature on the works of Gabriel Fauré, and filling this gap played a decisive role in the writing of my dissertation. While Renáta Darázs's dissertation, titled *Gabriel Fauré's Songs*, and a study by Klára Móricz address the composer's songs, only a few brief program notes on his piano works can be found in various music journals. Furthermore, the composer's piano pieces are unjustly neglected to the background not only in the domestic literature, but also in the concert scene.

Fauré's thirteen nocturnes, composed between 1875 and 1921, form a representative part of his oeuvre; a significant shift in his musical style can be observed in the last five of these compositions. These works are expressed in the individual voice of Fauré's late creative period, thus not only differing from the earlier pieces in the series but also significantly departing from the traditional stylistic features of the nocturne genre. Starting with the birth of the genre – the works of John Field and Frédéric Chopin – my dissertation outlines the historical and theoretical

context that is essential for a complex and layered analysis of the late nocturnes.

The most relevant foreign research on the subject includes the monographs by Jean-Michel Nectoux and Robert Orledge: these works provide a detailed account of Fauré's life, musical language, and his reception in music history.

In addition to the publications by Nectoux and Orledge, numerous dissertations have examined the composer's piano works, including his nocturnes. Although these dissertations contain valuable, in-depth structural and harmonic analyses, they leave aside the aspects of performance practice. The aim of my research is to fill this gap and to explore the interpretative possibilities of the late nocturnes through an analysis of the musical texture and an understanding of Fauré's musical language.

II. Sources

In addition to the monographs by Nectoux and Orledge mentioned above, the primary source material for

my dissertation consists of the recordings used to explore various interpretative possibilities. Fauré's five late nocturnes, as interpreted by ten pianists – Germaine Thyssens-Valentin, Jean-Michel Damase, Éric Heidsieck, Jean-Philippe Collard, Yvonne Lefébure, Vlado Perlemuter, Paul Crossley, Kathryn Stott, Michel Dalberto, and Marc-André Hamelin. In addition to the high aesthetic quality they represent, their connection to French musical traditions played a decisive role in the selection of these performers.

Fauré's piano roll recordings made between 1905 and 1913 also serve as a prominent source of audio material in my dissertation, providing an authoritative reference point for the composer's use of tempo in his own works. My primary sources for the musical examples are the first editions of Fauré's late nocturnes, published by Heugel and Durand.

In addition to the composer's own interpretation, Marguerite Long's essay *Au piano avec Gabriel Fauré* – written by one of the 20th century's most outstanding pianists – served as an important guide, offering insight into the relationship between the composer and the

performer. Although Long did not make a recording of the late nocturnes, her insights are relevant and important regarding the interpretation of Fauré's music.

Secondary sources for my analysis include writings on the historical development of the nocturne genre. In the case of John Field, I rely on Allan J. Wagenheim's biography, as well as articles by Robin Langley, Patrick Piggott, and Nicholas Temperley; regarding Frédéric Chopin, I refer to Alan Walker's monograph, Tad Szulc's biography, and Jonathan D. Bellman's collection of essays. Regarding Fauré, Aaron Copland's obituary and the biographies by Charles Koechlin and Norman Suckling served as a starting point, while among the writings that analyze the composer's musical language in detail, the studies by Carlo Caballero and James Sobaskie, as well as Robin Tait's PhD dissertation, served as the guiding sources.

III. Method

I have contextualized the five late nocturnes by providing a historical overview of the nocturne genre –

through a comparison of works by Field, Chopin, and Fauré – and by illustrating the organic development of Fauré’s musical language.

I structured the interpretative analysis of the late nocturnes around four musical aspects: use of time, harmonic language, rhythm, and individual interpretative approaches. In the musical examples, I used a consistent system of symbols to visually represent interpretative nuances.

The audio source material for the comparative analysis covers a period from 1959 to 2023, allowing a wide spectrum of interpretative possibilities to be explored. I also analyze the ten pianists’ performances in light of Fauré’s most important principle, which states that “dynamics are the thing, not the change of tempo.” In addition to interpreting various musical phenomenon, my analyses also seek to highlight exactly what concept means for the performance practice of the late nocturnes.

IV. Results

In my research, I was guided by the goal of using my analyses – through the interpretative approaches of ten performers – to delve into the depths of a musical texture that appears puritanical yet is deeply expressive, and thereby to form a comprehensive view of the musical processes that characterize Fauré’s late nocturnes. My research highlights that the phenomenon of “sterile tempo” built into the general performance practice of Fauré’s piano works derives from the composer’s misinterpreted principle cited above. Fauré did not consider the rubato playing style – an organic component of the Romantic performance tradition – to be inappropriate, but rather those tempo fluctuations that resulted from self-serving and excessive virtuosity, and which replaced a deeper musical interpretation of his compositions with superficial gestures.

Since Fauré provided very few indications in his late works, performers are often given free rein regarding the timing and dynamic structure of musical passages. My analyses show that performers who aim for a deep understanding of the musical fabric not only supplement

or nuance the sparse dynamic indications in the late nocturnes, but often override them as well.

My dissertation is the first detailed work written in Hungarian to analyze Fauré's solo piano works; in the field of comprehensive interpretative analysis of the late nocturnes, it also offers a novelty from an international perspective.

V. Performances

The list includes all the concerts in which I have played works by Fauré.

9 November 2014 Máté Bán's MA diploma concert, Budapest, Liszt Academy, Grand Hall

Fauré: Violin Sonata No. 2 in E minor, Op. 108 with Máté Bán, flute, Transcription for flute by Máté Bán

24 April 2017 Chamber music recital, Budapest, Budapest Music Center, Library

Fauré: Piano Quintet No. 1, Op. 89 with Réka Baksai, violin, Janka Balogh-Jámbor, cello, Máté Bán, flute, Csaba Pálfi, clarinet

9 November 2017 Solo Recital, Szentes, Concert Hall

Fauré: Nocturne No. 1 in E-flat minor, Op. 33 No. 1

Nocturne No. 6 in D-flat major, Op. 63

Nocturne No. 11 in F-sharp minor, Op. 104 No. 1

24 November 2017 Ady 140: Endre Ady Memorial Evening, Szeged, Fricsay Concert Hall

Fauré: Nocturne No. 6 in D-flat major, Op. 63

1 December 2017 Ady 140: Endre Ady Memorial Evening, Hódmezővásárhely, Ferenc Bessenyei Community Center

Fauré: Nocturne No. 6 in D-flat major, Op. 63

16 July 2019 Festival D'Été, La Grange aux Pianos, France, Chassignolles

Fauré: Piano Trio, Op. 120 with Máté Bán, flute, Morgane de Lafforest, cello, Transcription by Máté Bán

4 June 2022 Solo Recital, Csongrád, Community Center

Fauré: Nocturne No. 3 in A-flat major, Op. 33 No. 3

Nocturne No. 6 in D-flat major, Op. 63

11 March 2023 Solo Recital, Budapest, Béla Bartók Memorial House

Fauré: Ballade, Op. 19

13 February 2026 Festival Academy Winterfest,
Lillafüred, Hotel Palota

Fauré: Ballade, Op. 19

16 February 2026 Solo Recital, Budapest, St. László
Community Center

Fauré: Ballade, Op. 19

Nocturne No. 6 in D-flat major, Op. 63