

DLA thesis abstract

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The songs of Gabriel Fauré

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I. Previous research in this subject area

The three main areas of Fauré's composing activity were piano music, chamber music and songs (indeed vocal music in general). If a composer writes in one particular genre throughout his career then researching in that genre can give us a valid overview of him as a creative artist. Fauré's first composition was vocal: the song *Le Papillon et la fleur*, written when he was sixteen, and his last song-cycle *L'Horizon chimérique* was composed in 1921. In the almost sixty years between these two dates he wrote more than a hundred songs: by no means as many as the two hundred of Gounod or Massenet, but in quality and importance the songs of Fauré surpass those of all his contemporaries.

Critical and musicological writing about Fauré fall into two categories: monographs and articles written during his life, and those written after his death, especially during the last fifty years (the latter generally demonstrating more critical views). Because of a lack of clear, factual evidence (such as manuscript sources) it was impossible for the opinions of Fauré's contemporaries to have a sound basis. Nevertheless, their personal memories and impressions are certainly useful and interesting, and their aesthetic judgements had a particular exactitude and value. In the "contemporaries" group we have monographs by Philippe Fauré-Fremiet (Fauré's son), Charles Kœchlin and Émile Vuillermoz, and articles by Aaron Copland, M. D. Calvocoressi and Leslie Orrey. One of the most important points of this contemporary writing was to acquit Fauré of his false image as a salon-composer, and also to turn the public's attention towards the less known masterpieces of Fauré's last period.

There are two monographs on Fauré, one written by Robert Orledge (*Gabriel Fauré*; London: Eulenberg Books, 1979) and the other by Jean-Michel Nectoux (*Gabriel Fauré, A Musical Life*; Cambridge University Press, 1991). These are both essential, as well as very detailed studies of the life, work, and style of Fauré, each being extending to a chronological catalogue of Fauré's works, a bibliography and, in the case of Nectoux, a discography as well. Jean-Michel Nectoux worked on Fauré for almost his entire life, and this monograph is a very extended version of his previous much smaller work with the same title (published by Éditions Seuil, Paris, 1972). He also wrote many articles on different aspects of Fauré's life and work, and edited his correspondence. Carlo Caballero's book on Fauré (*Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*; Cambridge University Press, 2001) is quite different, since he discusses the composer from the standpoint of aesthetic categories of his own devising.

One of the most important works on the history of French art-song is that by Frits Noske (*La Mélodie française de Berlioz à Duparc*; Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1954). This explains the history of all the genres of this type and contains a chapter on the early songs of Fauré. David Cox wrote the chapter on French song in *A History of Song* (edited by Denis Stevens). There is one chapter on Fauré's mélodies in Elisabeth Schmierer's *Geschichte des Liedes* and in Barbara Meister's *Nineteenth-century French Song: Fauré, Chausson, Duparc and Debussy*. Vladimir Jankélévitch's major work on Fauré's songs, *Gabriel Fauré et ses mélodies* (Paris: Plon, 1938), and its extended version *Gabriel Fauré et l'inexprimable* (Paris: Plon, 1974) are unfortunately not available in printed form in Hungary, so only a partial online consultation was possible with regard to the present dissertation.

Although much has been written about Fauré, the majority is biographical in nature, with only a few focusing on musical matters. With the exception of Jankélévitch's book and some unpublished theses, only a few short articles exist that concern themselves with the songs of Fauré. His earliest vocal compositions have been particularly neglected: the most detailed analysis of them may be found in a chapter of the afore-mentioned book by Noske.

As far as neglect is concerned, this has been even more extensive at the hands of Hungarian researchers: the only such article is one on Fauré's *La Chanson d'Eve* by Klára Móricz. It is perhaps hardly surprising, if regrettable, that I encountered considerable problems in accessing not only the available literature on the composer, but even scores of his works. This reflects the general difficulty in researching a French musical topic in Hungary, for all that a knowledge of Fauré and his contemporaries (Chausson, Duparc, Chabrier, Gounod, Massenet, Bizet, Lalo, Hahn, etc.) is indispensable for anyone is interested in the vocal works of Debussy or Ravel.

II. Sources

The first published works of Fauré were songs written in the 1860s. The first *romances* were published either individually or in small collections of three or four songs, by the publishers Choudens or Hamelle; none of them carried an opus-number. The first larger collection, of twenty-five *mélodies*, was published by Choudens in 1879. This was recollated and generally revised in 1908, at the time of the third collection's preparation.

The opus-numbers of the earliest compositions were added by Fauré's publisher Hamelle in 1896. Fauré applied for membership of the *Institut de France*, and needed a catalogue of his works. He therefore asked Hamelle to give to his first songs opus numbers from 1 to 8, and so these relate neither to these songs' compositional nor publication chronology, following rather their publication order in the first collection. After this first collection the composer added his own opus-numbers, though some of the songs have a very complicated "numerical history": this is particularly true of op. 83, which had two other numbers before achieving its final identity. In 1908, sixty of Fauré's *mélodies* were published in three collections of twenty apiece.

Fauré's first real song-cycle (*Cinq mélodies 'de Venise'*, op. 58) was published in Hamelle's third collection, but all the other song-cycles were published separately. So *La Bonne Chanson* (op. 61) was published in April 1894 (again by Hamelle). After 1904 Fauré's vocal works were mainly in the form of cycles (*La Chanson d'Eve*, op. 95; *Le Jardin clos*, op. 106; *Mirages*, op. 113; *L'Horizon chimérique*, op. 118), and these were published either by Heugel or by Durand. Between these cycles the composer wrote only a few stand-alone songs, mainly written "to order" or for a particular occasion. Since these works (*Le Don silencieux*, op. 92; *Chanson*, op. 94; *Vocalise-Etude* (no opus number), and *C'est la paix!*, op. 114) were published as single songs and never reprinted, they have today become rarities.

Though Fauré's most important vocal writing is to be found in his song-cycles, some of his earliest songs remain most representative of his output. These include *Lydia* (op. 4, no. 2), *Après un rêve* (op. 7, no. 1) and *La Chanson du pêcheur* (op. 4, no.1) (these last two were amongst those termed "Italianate" by Nectoux). The *mélodies* of opus 18, 23 and 39 also show a high level of inspiration.

III. Method

More than half a century passed between the writing of Fauré's first and last vocal works. Even at first sight there is a great difference, a remarkable change, between his first Romantic *romances* [sic] and his "neoclassical" pieces written in that very personal style of his last years. It needs to be asked whether this difference arises through conscious eclecticism or a truly organic development. Having lived through the first decades of the twentieth century, a period of transition, and therefore of many and various artistic influences, it would have been typical for

Fauré to have shown eclecticism in his compositional development. This notwithstanding, I felt that the most important matter of all for me to discuss was Fauré's songs as individual creations in their own right, both stylistically, and even spiritually.

As previously stated, the songs of Fauré can quite simply be divided into two groups: cycles, in which the songs are related to one another both textually and musically, and separate songs grouped into opus number by a mere publisher or accident of contemporaneity. The latter are more typical of Fauré's first period, the coherent song-cycles appearing mostly later in his output. However this simple approach will not suffice in the planning of a comprehensive discussion of these works, especially if we are interested the changes or the development of their stylistic qualities. This is particularly true of such important, later groups of songs as opp. 76, 83, 85 and 87 which are not cycles, but only collections published together.

The most basic way of researching a composer's stylistic development is by following a chronological order of composition, but this can make it difficult to divide his output into different periods. In Fauré's case the easiest to assign is his last period: the style common to his last four song-cycles is so special and unique, and these cycles are chronologically so separated from his other songs as to make the drawing of a clear line comparatively straightforward. Separating his early, perhaps less individual songs from those of the mature master that he became is more difficult, but for various stylistic reasons I have drawn this line between op. 39 and op. 43.

A definitive dating and fixing of the chronological order of the first songs is almost impossible to arrive at, though Nectoux was able to establish a reasonable ordering of them. Therefore, in order to discuss the first songs a different approach was necessary. Groups can be gathered together across more than one opus number, as in those to texts by Victor Hugo or Armand Silvestre. However, using a particular poet is not always a sufficient means for the making of groups, so other characteristics have also been employed, as, for example, in the chapter on the influence of the Viardot family. In studying the early pieces another important question arises, namely at what point did Fauré's compositions turn from being youthful *romances*, written in a conventional, light manner, to the greater sophistication of the *mélodie*? When did he find his own style and language, giving his work a truly personal "touch", and what does it consist in? I discussed these questions in a separate chapter.

The method of my thesis is mostly analytic. Though I wrote on all of the *mélodies*, a dissertation is not a manual. The depth and approach of my analysis varies in keeping with the different styles, periods or genres of the compositions in question. Within such an unavoidably narrow compass I have been obliged to ignore all other pieces written for voice (for example duets, the *Requiem*, the two *dramas lyriques*). I mention other kinds of vocal composition only if there is a strong connection with a particular song under discussion. In analysing a song I am curious about questions of genre, form, melodic characteristics, rhythm and harmony, seeking always to draw out the most interesting or most typical aspects of the particular case in view. I have also been interested to investigate how an original poem inspired the musical realisation of the songs. The length and depth of any particular analysis is matched to the artistic importance of the composition in question. I also attempted to map the connections between the different compositions.

IV. Achievements

Fauré's songs have importance not only in the context of their composer's total output but also when set in the history of French vocal compositions more widely, and especially in the history of the *mélodie*. Beside Duparc and Debussy Fauré was one of the first significant composers of this new genre.

Consistent analysis of the changes within Fauré's style allows one to observe how the most important characteristics – themes, harmony or forms – remain almost unaltered. Fauré's melodic line is often based on scale fragments, such as one finds at the root of the *Viardot* theme, or in the first lines both of *Nell* and *La Mer est infinie*. Except for some virtuoso pieces Fauré's songs have a comfortable range because they are designed to declaim their poem in a very sensitive way. Almost from the beginning Fauré's prosody is impeccable, with his rhythmic and metrical usage aiding clear and expressive diction. Likewise, his harmonic world may be said to be continuous and fluent, with its most typical characteristics (unresolved chains of dissonances, frequent modulation – especially to keys a third distant, the mixing of modal and tonal elements, use of whole-tone scales) seen in operation from his earliest period. His forms are always balanced and coherent, not just in simple ABA forms, but for example, in his writing of extremely beautiful *mélodies* based on cells of two or three bars (the first such being *Le Secret*, the last *Diane, Séléné*).

Besides these all-pervading stylistic congruities one may identify characteristics connected with much shorter periods of his life. Changes within his interests are readily noticed. Fauré can set aside poets or compositional tools if they become boring or too familiar to him. The strophic form of the *romance* very soon takes on more sophisticated forms in his *mélodies*. At the end of 1890s whole-tone scales are very typical in the last lines of some songs (*Soir*; *Le Parfum impérissable*), whereas later he used this tool in a less conspicuous manner. Common themes giving unity to a given song-cycle are typical only of the first three. This method is taken further in op. 58, has become very complex in *La Bonne Chanson*, but is less characteristic of *La Chanson d'Eve*. Moods and atmosphere within particular song-cycles are also varied: the vivid, joyful world of *La Bonne Chanson* contrasts highly with the intimate, erotic atmosphere of *La Chanson d'Eve*. With his next song-cycle (*Le Jardin clos*) Fauré continues this highly personal, almost puritanical style, very far from the symphonic flow of *La Bonne Chanson*. Nonetheless, after this austere, restrained, and simplified manner he returns to the rich and more colourful atmosphere of *Mirages* and *L'Horizon chimérique*.

Fauré's style was hardly affected by other composers. Only his first songs bear the mark of Gounod's influence and of his teacher Niedermeyer. But after the early *romances* he soon found his own language (*Lydia*). In his early song we can detect some traces of different influences. The Italianate songs surprisingly display the typical melodic virtuosity, and there are some dramatic songs with a distinctly German flavour (*Automne*, *Fleur jetée*). Duparc also impressed Fauré with his Baudelaire songs, but Fauré's own Baudelaire settings show uneven quality. The most striking changes happened probably at the turn of the century. If even *La Bonne Chanson* took his public by surprise, his last, very productive, period was utterly unpredictable, with four important song-cycles written by a composer gradually falling into the isolation of deafness.

Fauré's style always remained within the boundaries of the "Romantic school", and, though neither his forms nor his harmony ever strayed beyond this romantic heritage, he treated both in a very distinctive personal way. In his last period his ambitions can be linked to those of his more obviously progressive contemporaries, with, for example, the noble simplicity of *Le Jardin clos* recalling certain pieces by Satie or Ravel. The declamatory recitative-like melodic lines of this period – as opposed to his early, almost Mendelssohnian style – come as a response to challenges posed by the climate of vocal music at that time: how to combine text and music in an expressive, and yet modern way.

V. Activity connected with the topic of the thesis

(This list contains all the occasions, within the last five years, when I sang any songs of Fauré. Of the concert programmes I only mention Fauré's works.)

23rd January 2006, Budapest, Chamber Hall, Old Academy of Music

(concert as a part of my doctoral studies)

FAURÉ: *Le Parfum impérissable*, *Arpège* (op. 76); *Prison, Soir* (op. 83)

Accompanied by Péter Kuzsner.

19th May 2006, Sopron, Evangelist church

(concert of charity)

FAURÉ: *En prière, Pie Jesu Domine* (from the *Requiem*)

Accompanied by Péter Kuzsner.

12nd June 2006, Budapest, Chamber Hall, Old Academy of Music

(concert as a part of my doctoral studies)

FAURÉ: *La Chanson d'Eve* – excerpts

Prima verba (op. 95/2), *Roses ardentes* (op. 95/3), *Comme Dieu rayonne* (op. 95/4),

L'Aube blanche (op. 95/5), *Eau vivante* (op. 95/6), *Veilles-tu ma senteur de soleil?* (op. 95/7)

Accompanied by Péter Kuzsner.

16th September 2006, Budapest, Chamber Hall, Old Academy of Music

(matinée concert organized by the Liszt Ferenc Memorial Museum)

FAURÉ *Le Parfum impérissable* (op. 76/1), *Arpège* (op. 76/2), *Automne* (op. 18/3), *Aurore* (op. 39/1),

Au cimetière (op. 51/2)

Accompanied by Péter Kuzsner.

5th August 2007, Roma, Teatro Marcello

(song recital)

FAURÉ: *Le Papillon et la fleur* (op. 1/1), *Mai* (op. 1/2), *Aurore* (op. 39/1), *Chanson d'amour*

(op. 27/1), *Après un rêve* (op. 7/1), *Clair de lune* (op. 46/2), *Nell* (op. 18/1)

Accompanied by András Wilhelm.

9th March 2008, Budapest, Chamber Hall, Old Academy of Music

(concert organized by the doctoral school)

FAURÉ: *Le Papillon et la fleur* (op. 1/1), *Mai* (op. 1/2), *Aurore* (op. 39/1), *Chanson d'amour*

(op. 27/1), *Après un rêve* (op. 7/1), *Clair de lune* (op. 46/2), *Nell* (op. 18/1)

Accompanied by András Wilhelm.