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Gabriel Fauré: a musical life

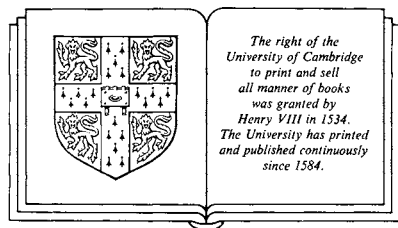
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GABRIEL FAURÉ

a musical life

Jean-Michel Nectoux

translated by Roger Nichols



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For Colette Ledran
and to the memory of
Vladimir Jankélévitch
in token of my gratitude

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Tanta dolcezza avea
più l'aere e'l vento

Petrarch, Sonnet 123

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Prelude

I have often been asked, during the many years I have spent in research on Fauré, the basic question: why Fauré? The way this question was asked often contained, as well as curiosity, a touch of astonishment, even of regret, that I should have devoted so much time and effort to a man still often considered as a marginal or minor composer . . .

On reflection, I would say that I did not choose to work on Fauré, but rather that his music slowly took me over and caught me in its toils.

The first book on music that I bought was Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Ravel* and I have to admit that since that time my fascination with Ravel, the man and the composer, has remained intact. But I did not dare to begin researching on him: the timidity of youth dissuaded me from trying to continue the labours of Jankélévitch and Roland-Manuel, who at that time stood as the *nec plus ultra* of Ravel scholarship, and I did not envisage the possibility of adopting another point of view, another way of tackling such a lofty subject. I will not hide the fact that I still feel Ravel's sensibility as being close to mine – and not only close, but familiar: an exhibition (Paris, 1975), radio interviews, notably with Pierre Boulez (1985), various articles and an album of historic records (1987) are witnesses to my enthusiasm – and sometimes I regret this lack of daring.

Even so, some works of Fauré had for years been exercising their charms on me, and the impression they made was all the more powerful for their being inaccessibly lodged in long distant memory; it needed only a new encounter for all these old impressions to be revived with a force I had thought exhausted. Thus the *Cantique de Jean Racine* speaks to me of childhood: 'Les Berceaux' and 'Automne' bring back the one-time adolescent so wisely and enthusiastically guided by Colette Ledran, who was in charge of a 'music option' for the students of the Lycée in Montgeron and introduced them to Mozart (*Le nozze di Figaro*), Beethoven (*An die ferne Geliebte*), Debussy (*Pelléas*), Fauré . . .

I must confess that it was some years before I fully appreciated Fauré's

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songs, kept at a distance probably by the old-fashioned look of some of the poems and by the extreme sophistication of the French *mélodie* itself. I found it easier to come to terms with the Requiem, the incidental music and the piano works, and the chamber music especially, which I discovered at the same time as Brahms's, joined with reading Proust as the main enthusiasms of my twentieth year. I decided to make Fauré's chamber music the subject of a study which would give for each work a clear historical background, a formal, thematic analysis – inspired by Claude Rostand's fine book on Brahms – and an anthology of critical writings.

The historical part of my project soon came up against the vague and often contradictory nature of the information relayed in the ten or so monographs devoted to the composer. Large grey areas remained in the catalogue of works marshalled by Fauré's younger son, Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, as an appendix to the second (1957) edition of the book which he had written on his father in 1929. He had also published in 1954 an invaluable collection of Fauré's letters to his wife, under the title *Lettres intimes*. This well documented book was proof that only by returning to the original sources – to letters, but also to musical manuscripts – could one escape from the narrow circle of the composer's bibliography which had been based, over a period of nearly a century, on the information given by Fauré to his earliest biographers, mistakes and all.

I began my research, at that time restricted to the letters and manuscripts relevant to the chamber music, and this brought me into contact with Mme Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, the composer's daughter-in-law. She was still living in the apartment on the rue des Vignes where the composer had spent his final years, and she welcomed this timid student with a warmth and a sympathy which at the time seemed to me perfectly natural. Today I am better placed to appreciate my good fortune.

This lucky meeting combined with the march of History to expedite my first attempts. The events of May 1968 left the energies which I had been harnessing towards my final law examinations at a loose end and opened up a vista of unoccupied time which would end who knew when. The general assemblies broke up in disorder, so, keeping an anxious ear open to the latest manifestations, I pursued my study of Fauré's chamber music. Paris was soon deserted, with no *métro*, no petrol and no pump attendants, and I used up my last precious litres of fuel crossing the spectral city to go and work in the rue des Vignes.

During the many hours I spent in the large studio, Blanche Fauré-Fremiet tirelessly made available to me the archive which she had inherited directly from the composer; several hundred letters, sixty or so musical

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manuscripts, documents and original iconography, not to mention souvenirs and portraits which filled the apartment and whose history she was able to tell me.

Her constant encouragement, her approachability and her friendly solitude were an enormous help in getting my research under way, and I was all the keener to pursue it because it fitted in with my parallel interest in the work of Marcel Proust; the Paris society dreamed of by Proust before he came to know it was the very one in which Fauré himself developed. The only letter from Proust to Fauré preserved in the composer's archive symbolised the union of the two areas of my research and I traced the relationship between the two in an article 'Proust et Fauré' in 1970.

Meanwhile my work on the chamber music had progressed some way, but I put it to one side for good when I was commissioned to write the volume on Fauré for the 'Solfège' series of paperbacks produced by Editions du Seuil. This, as well as being an opportunity, was also a challenge for a totally inexperienced author of twenty-three, whose first book was to appear in the very same collection as Jankélévitch's *Ravel*.

At the start of my research, Blanche Fauré had been kind and thoughtful enough to introduce me to Vladimir Jankélévitch and now, when I look back on those early years, it is this meeting which seems to me to have been the crucial event. Despite his unparalleled knowledge of Fauré, he never imposed his own point of view but, on the contrary, wanted to know mine; and even though he disapproved of certain aspects of my research methods, which were aimed at establishing precise facts and attaining a measure of historical truth – difficult as that may be – he never tried to turn me from them. Instead, he welcomed me with a generosity, a warmth, an enquiring spirit and an accuracy of speech which made my visits to him unforgettable, chatting over a cup of Russian tea in the famous study with books up to the ceiling, leaving only the window free through which the apse of Notre-Dame could be spied in the dusk.

Jankélévitch was a profound influence on the development of my approach from one that was strictly analytical or historical to one that allowed ample room for sociology and above all for aesthetics. This influence is obvious in the little 'Solfège' monograph, published in 1972, but is to be found on a still deeper level in the thesis 'Gabriel Fauré et le théâtre', which I wrote under his guidance and presented in 1980, and in the present book.

The publication of the initial monograph made clear the need for work on a broader basis, encompassing the whole of his output and involving systematic research on original documents; they alone could form a solid

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basis for future efforts. In the course of twenty years' research in public and private collections in Europe and North America, I have studied about a hundred and twenty of Fauré's musical manuscripts and more than three thousand of his autograph letters.

Not all this correspondence is of equal interest: the telephone was still a rarity and the contents of the *pneumatiques*, which fulfilled a parallel function, are often dull or incomprehensible. I chose four hundred of the letters for publication. On the advice of Yves Gérard, to whom I owe a large part of my strictly musicological training, I began by publishing the complete correspondence between Saint-Saëns and his pupil Fauré, covering a period of sixty years, and in a number of articles I brought out letters between Fauré and such major creative artists as Ravel, Debussy, Albéniz and Flaubert. In 1980, I published an anthology of more than two hundred letters (G. Fauré: *Correspondance*) forming a kind of autobiography of the composer built up through his contacts with friends. It was in fact translated into English in 1984 as *Gabriel Fauré, His Life through his Letters*. My other work in the field of Fauré studies has included a discography in 1979, listing all the recordings of his works made between 1900 and 1977; an album of historical records and a small travelling exhibition in 1974; some twenty articles, lectures and an edition of the Requiem in both its versions.

One reason for the extent of this involvement was that there was a battle to be fought on behalf of a composer who was unjustly looked down on. Nothing stirs the energies of youth like the notion of defending a noble cause . . . With hindsight, I realise that all this activity had in it an element of unreality: there is value in making a composer's works known, but it is the music and only the music that bears within it its own destiny, depending on the workings of chance and on changes in tastes and fashions. Our contemporaries will only ever adopt the music which speaks to them and which fulfils their needs.

The French always like attaching labels to things, and my sustained interest in music soon led to my being regarded as a 'Fauré specialist'. So I should like to say that, both through choice and through my jobs at the Bibliothèque Nationale and now at the Musée d'Orsay, I have worked not only on Proust and Ravel, as I have mentioned, but also on Debussy, Stravinsky, Falla, Honegger, Mallarmé, the Ballets russes and Mahler. These studies which, being directed towards the setting up of exhibitions, tended to be angled towards iconography, allowed me to put my work on Fauré into some kind of perspective and to avoid the dangers of a narrow monomania! I have to admit that nowadays I no longer have any great

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desire to hear Fauré's music, no doubt because I know it too thoroughly, but I also have to confess that when I hear it, on the radio or in the concert hall, I find that its emotional power remains unaltered.

In the present book I have tried to present a summary of my ideas and to make a synthesis of the somewhat piecemeal labours of these twenty years. The initial proposal for the volume came from Michael Black, then editor at the Cambridge University Press, who first suggested the idea in principle and then, in 1976, gave me a firm commission. Basically it is a biography, but I wanted to avoid the division into 'life' and 'works' which, apart from being unsubtle and artificial, makes it almost impossible to avoid tedious repetitions. I have therefore proceeded along chronological lines, but with frequent breaks where it was natural to pursue some particular topic. So I have not followed the composer step by step, as in the classic biographies, but I have chosen to vary my approach, which may be either analytical, historical or aesthetic or may even, briefly, turn towards the essay form.

The basic facts of Fauré's life will be found in linear, chronological layout at the end of the book (p. 501).

As for the catalogue of works, since the one drawn up by Philippe Fauré-Fremiet followed the order of opus numbers, and the one I published in 1980 in *The New Grove Dictionary* was organised by types of work, I have chosen this time to observe the chronological order of composition. This order will undoubtedly be revised as a result of future research, because the dating of Fauré's works during the first fifteen or twenty years of his composing life is hard to establish. Few letters of his survive from the period between 1860 and 1875 and he did not date his letters until his last years. His musical manuscripts, on the other hand, often carry dates, but few of them survive from these years because Fauré was in the habit of giving them away to interpreters, friends or relations, usually without bothering to keep a copy. In a letter written late in life to Roger Ducasse, Fauré admitted that for years he paid no attention to maintaining an archive of his own music. His characteristic casualness and the lukewarm opinion he had of himself combined to lay many a trap for his biographers.

With the chronology of Fauré research now more or less established, it remains to study the music in depth. In this book, which deals with the whole of Fauré's output, I have had to discuss most of his works only briefly, including information on form and thematic treatment that will, I hope, help readers to appreciate pieces some of which are little known. A start is at last being made to publish the critical editions that are indispensable. Some idea of the discoveries yet to be made in the field of Fauré

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autographs in private collections can be gained from the fact that we have still not found the manuscripts of such well-known works as the Ballade (the version for piano solo), *Thème et variations*, ‘Clair de lune’, ‘Après un rêve’, ‘Les Berceaux’ and the Trio. Fauré research is only at its beginning.

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