

I Gradus ad Parnassum

In 1845 France was entering a period of industrial and colonial development that was to make her, with Britain, one of the richest and most powerful nations in the world. The previous half-century had been the most disturbed of her entire political history. Even if Louis-Philippe's reign was shortly to come to an end, the lesson of 1789 was not to be completely grasped and assimilated until 1871 when defeat in the Franco-Prussian War finally put paid to dreams of returning to the monarchy or the Empire.

The desire for power shown by the bourgeoisie in 1789 had been no more than a flash in the pan. Those institutions which had been brought into being by the Revolution evolved towards a gradual reconcentration of power, and Napoleon's vision of a France that could hold its own on the European stage had done no more than mask this process. Louis XVIII had wanted to fashion a constitutional monarchy on the English model, but the idea did not survive his restoration which, though rejecting absolutism, made no secret about giving power back to the land-owning aristocracy. The 1848 Revolution, and the deceptively grandiose façade of the Second Empire, were the harbingers of the bourgeoisie's final achievement of a power that would last. It was a power carefully graded according to merit, from the village schoolteacher at one end of the scale to the government minister at the other, and work was its new religion, closely allied with the idea of progress – whether collective progress in the sense of the nation's material possessions and influence, or individual progress measured in terms of social advancement. This opening-out of French society, so accurately captured by Balzac, is well illustrated by the history of Faure's family.

The name 'Faure', pronounced 'Faoure' in the Provençal dialect, belongs to a very old family in the Pyrenean district of the Midi, appearing as early as the thirteenth century in the list of the parishes in the Toulouse area. The composer was descended from the branch that settled at

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Varilhes, near Foix, in the middle of the fifteenth century. Its members were bourgeois land-owners of considerable means. A number of birth certificates dating from the seventeenth century show the noble 'de' before the 'Fauré', but this prefix died out gradually as the family became poorer, probably owing to the repeated division of land with each new generation.¹

The composer's paternal grandfather, already bearing the name Gabriel Fauré, was following his own father's trade as a butcher in Foix when Toussaint-Honoré, the composer's father, was born there on 8 October 1810. The composer's maternal grandfather, Germain Lalène, born and buried at Gailhac-Toulza in the district of Toulouse, had reached the rank of captain in the course of his service with Napoleon's army. With the Restoration of 1815 he went back to using his full name, Germain de Lalène-Laprade. His daughter Marie-Antoinette-Hélène (born 9 January 1809) did not let this title of the minor nobility prevent her from marrying Toussaint Fauré in 1829; he had broken with his family's business tradition and was beginning his professional life as a schoolmaster at Gailhac-Toulza.

Beneath his side-whiskers Toussaint Fauré was a strict and dignified man, the archetypal dedicated government servant. He was formal in his manners and conscientious in performing his duty, all the more so since his schoolmaster's post was what gave him his place in society. Being an energetic conformist, he could look forward to a fine career as a man of standing in the area, a pillar of the Establishment from the time of the Restoration to that of the Second Empire. He became assistant inspector of primary education at Pamiers in 1839, inspector in 1847, and in 1849 he was appointed director of the Teachers' Training School at Montgauzy, on the way to Foix. He was in Corsica for a short time and ended his career at Tarbes.

Toussaint was the first of the family to graduate to government employment, and he set a powerful example:² his five sons and his brother-in-law all saw government service at one time or another. Amand (1834–1918) was the eldest of his sons and his career was both successful and varied. At twenty-one he became a tax official, but left the world of finance in 1863 to study law. He soon came to the notice of the Imperial regime due to his militantly republican opinions which brought him into the ranks of reforming journalists. From 1865 to 1877 he was political correspondent for several newspapers, both in Paris and in the provinces, even acquiring a printing works in 1877. His independence and his political attitudes led to all kinds of problems and worries, both under the Empire and in the years

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after the defeat of 1870. In Constantine he founded *Le Progrès de l'Algérie*, only to see the paper banned by General MacMahon at the end of 1869.

He returned to Paris, worked on *Le Réveil* and collaborated with Pierre Larousse in editing the law articles in the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*. When the Republic was finally established, his fidelity to its principles and his talents as a publicist earned him entry into the prefectorial system in 1877. He was sub-prefect at Murat, Louhans and Tournon, and was appointed prefect of the Ardèche in 1883. He was married and had two children, but led an openly riotous life, drinking heavily, acquiring a succession of mistresses, accumulating large debts with tradesmen, to the point that in 1885 he asked to be released from his duties. He was dismissed the following year.

He returned to journalism and managed to satisfy his creditors, but by the time his dismissal was revoked by President Carnot in 1890 he was ill and could not take up any administrative post. He retired to Toulouse.

His brother Paul's life was as adventurous as it was brief. Born in 1835 or 1836, he joined Napoleon III's army, went through the Italian campaign and was made an officer; then he took part in an expeditionary force to China and died in Algiers of yellow fever at the age of thirty.

Fernand (1837–1918) followed, on the other hand, the moderate, worthy lifestyle of his father. He was a brilliant pupil at the *Ecole normale supérieure* and was appointed as a teacher of mathematics at the Lycée in Tarbes. He then became a school inspector successively at Gap, Perpignan and Pau, where he retired in 1902.

Albert (1840–1908) became an officer in the Marines. He too took part in expeditions to China and the fever he caught there was responsible for his early retirement. Rose-Elodie-Gabrielle (1830–95), known as Victoire, was the eldest of the six children and the only girl and her husband, Casimir Fontes, succeeded his father-in-law as head of the *Ecole normale* in Montgauzy. Gabriel was fifteen years younger than her, the Benjamin of the family. His career may have followed quite different paths from the rest, but even so he too spent long years as a government employee – the material benefits of which have to be set against the consumption of time that might have been spent in composition.

According to his mother, Gabriel's arrival was unplanned but he was brought up in the same way as the others. He was born at 4 o'clock in the morning on 12 May 1845 at Pamiers (Ariège) and was called Gabriel after his father's father, and Urbain after an uncle on his mother's side. Gabriel-Urbain Fauré was registered at the *mairie* and baptised in the church of Notre-Dame du Camp, close to the house where he was born, at 17 rue

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Major. The baby was sent out to a wet-nurse at Verniolle, near Varilhe, which had been the family base since the end of the Middle Ages. In 1849 the whole family moved to the Ecole normale in Montgauzy, a vast building, recently put up on the road out of Foix on the ruins of an old convent, and backed on to by a chapel which was a place of pilgrimage for the local inhabitants. Gabriel spent many hours there as a boy and found his way towards music by improvising on the harmonium. He was later to remember³ that ‘an old blind lady’ had given him some basic instruction. His brothers spent the school terms at the lycée, but then Gabriel had the forty boarders of the Ecole normale as companions in the large house. Even so, as Fauré later confided to his wife:⁴ ‘already as a child . . . I tended, so my parents said, to be preoccupied and silent’.

‘He would be sent to spend the summer at Verniolle with his nurse’, wrote Philippe Fauré-Fremiet.⁵ ‘The old *curé* of the neighbouring village of Rieucros was a friend of the family and he used to come and fetch my father in a pony and trap to spend two or three days with him. The boy was free to do what he liked, was given the run of the church and had the old man at his beck and call . . . It looked then as though Gabriel Fauré might become a priest.’ The whole of his early childhood was steeped in this solitary, clerical atmosphere.

It is more than likely that the young men who were training to be teachers at Montgauzy received some musical instruction. We know, from a letter of Toussaint Fauré published by his grandson,⁶ that the Ecole normale did have a piano, and it is reasonable to imagine that someone there showed him how to put his fingers on the keyboard – perhaps one Bernard Delgay, who later claimed the honour of being his first teacher during the years in question.⁷ At all events, by the summer of 1853 Gabriel, then aged eight, had made enough progress for his father to ask him to play for a visitor, Simon-Lucien Dufaur de Saubiac, a senior civil servant in the Chamber of Deputies⁸ (or *Palais législatif*, as it was known in the Second Empire). So far the young Gabriel’s musical gifts had not been taken seriously. He went to primary school like all children of his age and the piano, or the harmonium, was just a harmless diversion. ‘My father’, he said in 1922,

. . . was surprised to discover my leanings towards music as there was no musician in my family. My talent showed itself before I was ten, and at such an early stage no one worried about any possible effect on my future. A little later on there were perhaps doubts about my adopting music as a career. Anyway my father was undecided – I was the sixth child in the family and he couldn’t afford to take risks.

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The boy's career was determined by M. Dufaur de Saubiac, who advised that he should be entered for the new school of religious music which was then being founded by Louis Niedermeyer. Toussaint-Honoré, after a year's reflection, decided to accept his advice. The curriculum included the 'humanities' as well as musical instruction, and boarders were supported by the Ministry of Fine Arts and Religious Culture to the tune of thirty-six bursaries of 500 francs each – the annual boarding fees were 1,000 francs for each child. Because of Toussaint-Honoré's family commitments he had to pay only a quarter of the boarding fees.

Louis Niedermeyer (1802–61), Swiss by birth, had received an extensive European musical education. In Vienna he sat at the feet of the great virtuoso Ignaz Moscheles, and made the acquaintance of ancient polyphonic music in Rome, where the tradition lived on (after a fashion),⁹ by working with Valentino Fioraventi, the choirmaster of the Papal Chapel. Finally, he spent time in Naples studying operatic technique with Rossini. Their friendship developed to the point where Rossini entrusted him with the arrangement of some of his earlier operas to satisfy the incessant demands of the Neapolitan theatres. Back in France Niedermeyer first made a name as a composer. But his various attempts at opera were unsuccessful and his reputation was built on fashionable romances and ballads. They may seem very dated nowadays but Niedermeyer shows himself to have been a man of literary taste: his choice of texts by outstanding contemporary poets like Hugo and Lamartine was to have an influence on Gounod.

Nonetheless the name 'Niedermeyer' is indissolubly linked with the renaissance of religious music in France. Church choirs had almost entirely disappeared during the 1789 Revolution. Their subsequent revival had been hampered by the confiscation of clerical property and that of the *émigré* nobility who had supported them in the past. Services in the Chapel Royal itself did not survive the Revolution of 1830, and the Royal School of Religious Music, founded by Alexandre Choron in 1817, was disbanded at his death in 1834. Despite these unfavourable circumstances, Louis Niedermeyer founded a 'Society of Vocal and Religious Music' in 1840, with the help of his 'pupil' Prince de la Moskowa. This Society performed sixteenth- and seventeenth-century works, and from 1843 these were published in an eleven-volume anthology.

The details of these performances did not, understandably, conform all that closely to modern musicological practice, containing as they did *tempo* indications (generally slow), dynamic markings and so-called 'corrections' of the harmony. Even so we must acknowledge Niedermeyer as a

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pioneer in the rediscovery of polyphonic music in France, fifty years before the famous performances of the Chanteurs de St-Gervais, conducted by Charles Bordes and so much admired by Debussy. To appreciate Niedermeyer's boldness we only have to hear the ridiculously naïve and banal stuff churned out at that same period by Alfred Lefébure-Wély on the organ of the Madeleine; his repertoire shows the depths to which religious music had fallen by succumbing to the infectious influence of the theatre. We can nowadays hardly imagine the extent to which the theatre dominated musical life, nor was it always the best theatre music that found its way into the churches.

If these degenerate practices were to be rooted out, reforms had to take place in the training of organists and choirmasters – a necessity already identified by Choron. In 1853 Niedermeyer persuaded Napoleon III to recognise the small boarding-school he had just founded, under the official title 'School of Classical and Religious Music'. It became better known under its later name, the Niedermeyer School. Its aim was to train organists and choirmasters who could then be employed by the bishops of each diocese. Gabriel Fauré was admitted in 1854, at the age of nine, as a scholar under the patronage of the Bishop of Pamiers. A report written by the director in that very year gives details of the curriculum.¹⁰ Apart from the traditional subjects (*solfège*, harmony, counterpoint) the emphasis was on instrumental performance (organ and piano). Alfred Bruneau, in his tribute to Fauré (Paris, 1925), mentioned the fifteen pianos congregated in a single classroom. We learn also from Niedermeyer that students had access to a pedal piano and an organ with twelve stops. The organ repertoire included works by Bach, Mendelssohn and the Belgian composer Lemmens – who had been hailed somewhat prematurely as the Bach of the nineteenth century; the piano teaching was based on Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. Fauré's organ teachers were Xavier Wackenthaler and particularly Clément Lorét but, as we shall see, the young student does not seem to have been greatly inspired by the instrument. The best exam result he achieved on it was a lowly 'accessit' in 1863.

On the piano, however, he proved to be a pupil of exceptional talent. Under Wackenthaler and Niedermeyer himself he won a first prize in 1860, followed by another first prize the next year and by a prize with distinction in 1862; by this time he was a pupil of that great virtuoso Saint-Saëns. In 1864 he was even refused permission to compete.¹¹ He was equally successful on the technical side, winning a prize for *solfège* (1857) and for harmony (1860) in spite of the sour disposition of his teacher Louis Dietsch (Dietsch was choirmaster at the Madeleine and a conductor at the

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Opera – he conducted the notorious Paris performances of *Tannhäuser* and wrote an opera on the libretto for *The Flying Dutchman* which Wagner had discarded). Fauré left the school in 1865 with a first prize in counterpoint and fugue, gained under the supervision of the young Eugène Gigout.

Apart from its methods of harmony teaching, which will be discussed later, the Niedermeyer School is notable for the time it gave to choral singing. Three times a week all the students came together under Louis Dietsch to sing Josquin, Palestrina, Bach and Vittoria, usually unaccompanied. The secular repertoire was sung only on student walks. Niedermeyer himself wrote a considerable amount for his school choir which regularly sang services at the church of St-Louis d'Antin, in the 9th *arrondissement*. His *Pater noster* was for a long time in the church repertoire and his *Grande messe solennelle* in B minor was praised by none other than Berlioz in an article in the *Journal des débats* (27 December 1849).

Another noteworthy feature of the Niedermeyer School was that pupils taught each other, the more senior ones helping out with *solfège* and piano courses, and so acquainted themselves with the pedagogical tasks that were to be a necessary part of their future jobs as choirmasters. It was open to the most brilliant pupils to be appointed to the staff as soon as they had left, as happened to Eugène Gigout who wrote in an autobiographical article:¹²

Fauré and I never left . . . and we never left each other either! I was a year older than he was and had to keep an eye on him as well as teaching him *solfège* and plainsong. I'm embarrassed to think that I corrected the counterpoint exercises of our greatest composer. In those days he used to draw cartoons for me, done with great facility and considerable wit.

Fauré himself taught composition at the Niedermeyer School for several months in 1871, as we shall see.¹³ In 1873 he was appointed a member of the Board of Studies responsible for awarding the outstanding students their choirmaster's and organist's diplomas. Gigout was a prize-winner, unlike his friend Fauré, it seems, who perhaps paid the penalty of some mediocre results in such important courses as organ-playing ('accessit' in 1863) and plainsong (2nd prize in 1864).

As well as courses in music, the School also provided 'some sort of general education', as Fauré describes it.¹⁴ Niedermeyer's report, from which I have already quoted, gives the weekly *corpus* of instruction for 1854: 'three French language lessons, two Latin, one arithmetic, one geography, one history and literature', to which were later added some

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smatterings of Italian. These subjects, together with religious instruction, were taught by the clergy of St-Louis d'Antin and Ste-Elisabeth. A report by Niedermeyer for 1857 states:¹⁵ 'The students listen to a religious reading every evening and they go to Mass on Thursdays and Sundays.' The teaching of the old priest at Rieucros was not forgotten – in 1857 Fauré won a prize for religious knowledge.

Fauré remained at the school for eleven years and seems to have weathered the intensive regime without very much difficulty. He was a pleasant, outgoing boy and was generally popular. Several of his fellow students were to be lifelong friends, including Eugène Gigout, Albert Périllhou and Julien Koszul, the grandfather of the composer Henri Dutilleux. The school schedule was fairly strict but, as Fauré later reported,¹⁶ this did not prevent them from getting into mischief. Gigout recalls, in the article already quoted, the memorable evening when they went to hear Gounod's *Faust* for the first time (in 1859 it was the very latest of operatic productions).

We wanted to hear this masterpiece which everyone was discussing so passionately. But, being boarders, we weren't allowed out at night. What was to be done? The work was being played at the Théâtre Lyrique on the evening of Shrove Tuesday. We were careful to inform the staff that we would be dining and staying the night with our 'boarding-parents', who stood *in loco parentis* during termtime. We'd been saving up and by pooling our resources managed to find places up in 'the gods'. We had no dinner that evening and after the performance of this masterpiece – which made the same impression on us as *Pelléas* did on the young of 1902 – we found ourselves on the streets of Paris in the middle of the night . . . We had a few sous left, enough for a bock. We went into a café, half-a-dozen of us including Fauré and Périllhou.

At two o'clock in the morning the waiter threw us out because we weren't eating or drinking . . . for one very good reason! And we had to spend the night out in the open, walking along the boulevards till we were exhausted, then having a rest on benches here and there; when the doors of the Madeleine opened we waited inside until a reasonable hour for returning to school. The authorities took a lenient view.

Niedermeyer himself was very fond of Fauré who had come to his new school at such a tender age. 'He was the apple of Niedermeyer's eye', Gigout goes on.

The Director would ask the boy to his parties where he met the most elevated members of the aristocracy and the official world. Gabriel used to sing them songs from his own area of France, and these *dilettanti* would find his mid-southern accent and his innate musicianship quite charming and delightful. That was Fauré's début in the polite society which he was never to abandon. Niedermeyer

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used to give him jam as a reward – just as Victor Hugo did to his grand-daughter when she deserved to be punished! – Gabriel's healthy appetite never forgot dear Niedermeyer's indulgence.

Because Fauré was so young and nice he was treated differently from the others. Even so he was scatterbrained and one day, when he'd committed some misdemeanour or other, Niedermeyer shut him up in his dressing-room and forgot about him . . . He discovered him in the evening, fast asleep.

In Niedermeyer the young Fauré found a teacher and a father, who could be tender even while being severe. The notebook bequeathed to the Bibliothèque Nationale by Niedermeyer's grand-daughter Marie-Louise Boëllmann-Gigout reveals that the work of Fauré, Gabriel,¹⁷ had its ups and downs. But Niedermeyer understood the boy's character – his wit, his warmth of heart, his dreaminess, his budding originality and his taste for literature, marked by two prizes in 1858 and 1862. Fauré was always to remember with gratitude the lessons he had from his first teacher. Niedermeyer's sudden death on 14 March 1861 distressed him greatly and all the more so because his place was taken by Louis Dietsch, the most despised of all the teachers, who took over as Director until the arrival in 1865 of Gustave Lefèvre, Niedermeyer's son-in-law.

Camille Saint-Saëns took over the senior piano class and in him Fauré discovered more than a teacher – he became a friend and guide. Saint-Saëns was the older of the two by ten years, already an established master and at this time beginning to make a name for himself as an organist and especially as a dazzling pianist. He turned his class into a veritable musical seminar devoted to tackling those 'modern' composers who did not find a place in the school's official list of studies: Liszt, Schumann and Wagner, with the last of whom Saint-Saëns maintained a close relationship. In the years that followed, Fauré never lost an opportunity to proclaim that he 'owed everything' to this young teacher he met in the formative years of adolescence. Their friendship was unclouded until Saint-Saëns' death in 1921, as I have indicated in my introduction to their published correspondence.¹⁸

Under Saint-Saëns' friendly and conscientious eye Fauré began to compose. Only some of these juvenilia have survived, such as his opus 1 no. 1, a romance on a rather insipid poem by Victor Hugo 'Le Papillon et la fleur', probably written at the period of Saint-Saëns' arrival (1861) to judge by what Fauré said of it:¹⁹ 'it was in fact my very first song, written in the school refectory surrounded by smells from the kitchen . . . and my first interpreter was Saint-Saëns'. Not that this little work, strophic in form, has much that could be termed individuality, recalling as it does the rather

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faded charms of the *opéra-comique* or even of the operetta, which were all the rage under the Second Empire. In this same year of 1861 Fauré was allowed to compete for the first time in the annual *concours* of the composition class, and obtained an 'accessit'. The works he submitted were a four-part fugue on a given subject, a fugue on a subject of his own composition and a 'piece of religious vocal music with instrumental accompaniment'.²⁰ In 1862 his name did not figure in the prize list but the following year he received a mention, according to an enigmatic report in *Le Ménestrel* (9 August 1863, p. 228): 'As he had not strictly complied with the rules laid down for the *concours* he could not be awarded a prize; but Gabriel Fauré and Adam Laussel both received a highly honourable mention . . . for their outstanding entries.' Fauré's 'piece of religious vocal music with instrumental accompaniment' has come down to us: a setting of Psalm 126, *Super flumina Babylonis*, the autograph orchestral score bearing the date 14 July 1863. This tuneful work, opening with a gentle evocation of the Euphrates, is scored for 5-voice mixed choir (SATBB) and large symphony orchestra (triple woodwind, three trombones, three trumpets). Although it was carefully preserved by the composer it has remained unpublished and has never appeared in any catalogue of his works.

In 1864 Fauré won a second prize for composition. It is most unfortunate that his entry has not survived because *Le Ménestrel* comments (7 August 1864, p. 286): 'this *concours* was quite exceptional'. He finally won a first prize for composition in 1865, very probably with the *Cantique de Jean Racine*, op. 11. In spite of a number of rather routine melodic and contrapuntal formulae there is character and originality in the serenity of mood, in the flow of chordal harmony and in the delicate but substantial choral writing. It recalls the most seductive and melodious passages of Mendelssohn or Gounod. The jury were so taken by its inner intensity and by its fervour, which matched Racine's text, that they did not hold Fauré to the letter of the rules. Perhaps because he had run short of time he had submitted his score with organ accompaniment instead of the instrumental accompaniment that was specified.

There exist two orchestral versions of the *Cantique de Jean Racine*. The first, for organ (or harmonium) and string quintet, was performed on 4 August 1866 at Rennes where Fauré was employed as an organist, as we shall see. This is probably the version conducted by César Franck – to whom the work is dedicated – in an orchestral concert given by the Société nationale de musique on 15 May 1875. The score and parts were once available for hire from Hamelle but unfortunately they can no longer be