

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 15 February 2025
7.30pm

James Ehnes violin
Jonathan Vinocour viola
Raphael Bell cello
Inon Barnatan piano

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Piano Quartet No. 1 in C minor Op. 15 (1876-9, rev. 1883)
I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro vivo • III. Adagio • IV. Allegro molto

Interval

Piano Quartet No. 2 in G minor Op. 45 (?1885-6)
I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio non troppo • IV. Allegro molto



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While **Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924) is best known for his Requiem and *Pavane*, these orchestral works are atypical of an output that focused largely on piano pieces, songs and chamber music. This went against the grain of a contemporary French musical scene where success in the opera house was privileged. For composers, the most prestigious place of study was the Paris Conservatoire and its most sought-after prize was the *Prix de Rome*, for which students had to compose a short cantata; this competition was viewed as a training ground for opera composers.

Fauré, however, never studied at the Conservatoire. Instead, his student years were spent at the *École Niedermeyer*, a small institution that focused on training organists and choirmasters. The musical language of sacred chant had an important impact on his music, and his school piano teacher, Saint-Saëns, was to become his most significant mentor and a lifelong friend. Despite having no previous links with the Conservatoire, Fauré was appointed professor of composition in 1896 and became director of the institution in 1905.

In 1871, Fauré was a founding member of the *Société Nationale de Musique*, a Paris concert organisation that aimed to promote contemporary French music, predominantly instrumental music which then had a marginal role in Paris concert life. Fauré's chamber works were also performed in aristocratic salons. This salon environment was evoked by Marcel Proust in his great sequence of novels *A la recherche du temps perdu*, and in 1897, Proust wrote to Fauré: 'I not only love, not only admire, not only adore your music, I have been and am still falling in love with it. I could write a book more than 300 pages long about it.' Proust might not have written specifically about Fauré, but he is widely considered to be one of the models for Proust's fictional composer Vinteuil.

The Paris salon environment was far removed from the composer's provincial origins. Saint-Saëns introduced Fauré to influential figures including the contralto and composer Pauline Viardot, who hosted a celebrated salon: Fauré's First Violin Sonata was dedicated to her violinist son Paul, and while composing the First Piano Quartet (from 1876-9) he had a relationship with her daughter Marianne. They became engaged, but while Fauré was passionately in love, Marianne was less enamoured and Fauré was deeply hurt when she broke off the relationship.

The piano quartet medium is an uncommon one: Fauré's few predecessors include Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn and Brahms, and Saint-Saëns composed two examples before Fauré, only one of which was published in his lifetime. Fauré's First Piano Quartet was premièred on 14 February 1880, though the finale was withdrawn and replaced by a different movement in 1883. The work is in the key of C minor, but as is characteristic of Fauré, modal inflections ensure the harmonic language is not straightforwardly tonal. The composer announces a

loud, dotted rhythm theme in the three string parts, accompanying it with offbeat piano interjections, and he keeps the energy going throughout the movement. This movement ends in the major key, though without any sense of a struggle that has been overcome: this is the end of a movement rather than the conclusion of the entire work.

Fauré's second movement Scherzo reminds us that the term means 'joke' – wit is never far away. The beautiful slow movement starts with a simple rising theme: Fauré's musical material is often innocuous and moving in its simplicity. Fauré's music is noteworthy for its beautiful codas, and the poignant conclusion to the slow movement is a lovely example of this: it seems to dissolve in a descending shower of notes. We return to a dotted rhythm theme in the Finale, though this time it is ascending. Fauré changes the texture with a chorale-like piano interlude in the centre of the movement, with string interjections that keep the momentum going, and here the major key ending conveys a joyous mood.

The Second Piano Quartet, in G minor (Op. 45) was first performed at the *Société Nationale* in 1887, with Fauré himself playing the piano part. For Robert Orledge, this is the work in which 'Fauré announces his full artistic maturity.' The quartet opens in dramatic mood with a restless theme that starts with a characteristic rising figure, presented over a rippling piano accompaniment: the three string instruments often work together as a foil to the piano's arpeggiations. The second movement is a brief Scherzo which, texturally speaking, has a lot in common with Fauré's First Piano Quartet. But while the mood of the First Quartet Scherzo was witty and playful, here the dynamics are loud and the rhythmic contrasts have a dramatic edge.

Fauré was born in Pamiers, a small town near the Pyrenees, and one of his earliest memories was of church bells tolling. This memory resurfaces in the third movement: Fauré wrote to his wife 'It is only in the Andante of the Second Quartet that I remember having translated - almost involuntarily - the very distant memory of bells ringing [...]'. The gentle, rocking oscillations seem to evoke comforting memories, as if the bells are lulling a child to sleep. The start of the fourth movement breaks this spell, returning to the home key and the turbulent mood of the fast sections. As in the First Piano Quartet, the Second ends in the major key: this time, Fauré's coda builds up speed and excitement to a triumphant conclusion.

Both Fauré's piano quartets show that this is a medium with the intimacy of a conversation between four musicians, and also a depth and scale to rival orchestral music. By pursuing his own path largely away from the opera house, Fauré showed his contemporaries that chamber music can also be a quintessentially French mode of expression.

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