

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 2 November 2024  
7.30pm

Steven Isserlis cello  
Joshua Bell violin  
Irène Duval violin  
Blythe Teh Engstroem viola  
Jeremy Denk piano  
Connie Shih piano

Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947)

Variations chantantes (1905)

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

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*

*Interval*

Gabriel Fauré

Piano Quintet No. 1 in D minor Op. 89 (1887-1905)  
*I. Molto moderato • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto  
moderato*



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Though born in Venezuela, **Reynaldo Hahn** came to Paris with his family when he was a young child and would become part of the fabric of French musical life. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of 11, where Jules Massenet became his teacher and guiding light, though he also studied privately with Saint-Saëns. By his late teens he was intimately acquainted with the French capital's salon society, to the extent of being Marcel Proust's lover. He would go on to write more than 100 songs. He considered Fauré to be the master of the idiosyncratically French form of art song, the *mélodie*, and set many of the same poets as his idol.

Song is enshrined within the soul of even an instrumental piece like the 1905 *Variations chantantes (sur un air ancien)* ('Singing variations on an ancient air'). The 'ancient air' is an aria from the opera *Xerxes* by Francesco Cavalli (1602-76), in which a court official expresses a desire for a life unfettered by protocol. The second of **Fauré's** two Piano Quartets was first performed in January 1887, with the composer at the piano. The first had met with approval at its première in 1880; perhaps it was this acclaim that led Fauré to return to an instrumental line-up less regularly catered for by composers than the piano quintet. And perhaps it made commercial sense, since performers would be looking for companion pieces to, say, the piano quartets of Mozart or Brahms. It's all 'perhaps', because the origins of the Second Piano Quartet are not documented. It is surmised that Fauré started work on the piece in late 1885 or early 1886.

He shows here a new willingness to engage with the principles of 'cyclical form' pioneered by Liszt and adopted with enthusiasm by César Franck. For both those composers the use of recurring themes or motifs across a multi-movement work was a way of giving the audience overt signals with regard to structural unity. Fauré's method is more subtle, establishing family relationships between his themes on a cellular level. We are more likely to have a sense of having passed this way before than of having our attention drawn to a striking landmark.

On the surface, however, the structures are traditional and laid out with clarity. In the first movement it is easy to trace a surging first subject, a more lyrical second subject, a development and a recapitulation. Meanwhile, on another level, the unison theme heard at the outset reappears in different guises: as a violin melody leading us to the second group, as the summation of the second subject, and as a bridge to the development, this time given to viola and cello. Almost all of the first movement's melodic contours reappear in the C minor scherzo, though transformed beyond easy recognition. The slow movement releases us from the uncomfortable grip of the scherzo and presents a pastoral idyll. The murmuring beginning is Fauré's recollection of hearing distant church bells

from his childhood home. The G minor finale abruptly returns us to the darkness and passion of the first movement. A change to the tonic major in the final pages creates an effect that is perhaps more manic than triumphant.

It took Fauré eight years to arrive at a satisfactory form for his First Piano Quintet. Some of the material was sketched out in 1887, and by 1890 a rough shape for the whole work had been drafted, though only the first-movement exposition had been fully composed. Yet Fauré was still undecided whether to fashion the piece as a third piano quartet or to add a second violin and make it a quintet. He had also dithered over the number of movements – three or four?

Work continued to be stop-start. The sketches were put aside completely between 1894 and 1903, and Fauré began to refer to the piece as 'that beast of a quintet'. At last it was completed in 1905, and the first performance followed in 1906, with the Quatuor Ysaÿe and pianist Blanche Selva getting by on minimal rehearsal. The blame for this lack of preparation would seem to rest mainly with Eugène Ysaÿe, the Quintet's dedicatee and possibly the inspiration for the composer's perseverance with the troublesome work. Fauré and Ysaÿe had become recital partners and friends in the late 1880s. 'King of the Violin' Ysaÿe may have been, but his haphazard approach to life could be exasperating for colleagues.

Fauré's health and disposition had not been good during the years of wrestling with the score. Spells of dizziness and depression worsened as he came to terms with the death of his father in 1885; the two men had never been able to establish a close relationship. By the time the Quintet was completed the deafness that would afflict the composer in his later years was becoming a significant hardship. Unsurprisingly the Quintet is largely introspective and reticent in general character.

Perhaps for that reason the work divided critical opinion for some time. But it was one of the works singled out when, in the 1920s, the American composer Aaron Copland argued for proper appreciation of Fauré's importance. In his opinion the composer showed 'all the earmarks of the French temperament: harmonic sensitivity, impeccable taste, classic restraint, and a love of clear lines and well-made proportions'. Copland's enthusiasm had developed during his studies with Nadia Boulanger, who had been one of Fauré's pupils and was herself a lifelong advocate of his music. In 1924 Copland published an article in *Musical Quarterly* with the title 'Gabriel Fauré: a neglected master'; he compared Fauré to Brahms, hailing 'a genius as great, a style as individual and a technique as perfect'.

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