

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 5 February 2024
7.30pm

Hommage to Fauré

Louis Lortie piano

- Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924) 9 Préludes Op. 103 (1909-10)
*Prélude in D sharp • Prélude in C sharp minor •
Prélude in G minor • Prélude in F •
Prélude in D minor • Prélude in E flat minor •
Prélude in A • Prélude in C minor • Prélude in E minor*
- Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937) Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré (1922) *arranged by Lucien Garban*
- George Enescu** (1881-1955) Pièce sur le nom de Fauré (1922)
- Louis Aubert** (1720-1783) Esquisse sur le nom de Fauré (1922)
- Florent Schmitt** (1870-1958) Hommage sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré Op. 72 (1922)
- Charles Koechlin** (1867-1950) Hommage à Gabriel Fauré (1922)
- Paul Ladmirault** (1877-1944) Hommage à Gabriel Fauré (1922)
Interval
- Gabriel Fauré** (1845-1924) Pavane Op. 50 (1887)
Ballade in F sharp Op. 19 (1877-9)
Thème et variations Op. 73 (1895)

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'Fauré? Never! If he comes, I go!' Thus expostulated Ambroise Thomas, then Director of the Paris Conservatoire, when Fauré's name was put forward for a composition professorship in the early 1890s. By 1896, however, Thomas himself had gone and Fauré was appointed to replace the newly retired Massenet. As a professor of composition, wrote his pupil Emile Vuillermoz, Fauré's influence was 'at once subtle and powerful. He never set down his aesthetic in a treatise, he authored no textbook [...] and yet his teaching bore the richest of fruits.'

That reflection appeared in December 1922, in a special 'Hommage à Fauré' issue of *La revue musicale*. An accompanying supplement comprised seven musical offerings, all based on a motif generated from the letters of Fauré's name. The first half of tonight's concert includes six of these pieces – each composed by a distinguished former pupil. Enescu offered a gently passionate nocturne, whose black-key chromatic shadings dissipate in the final, quiet statement of the *F-A-U[G]-R[D]-É* motif in the bass. Ravel's contribution was a tender *Berceuse* (originally conceived for violin and piano) and Koechlin's a contemplative chorale. Paul Ladmirault's spirited rigaudon frames an affectionate reminiscence of Fauré's pianistic language in the central trio, while the modal fluidity of Louis Aubert's *Esquisse* likewise suggest a skilful *à la manière de...* Florent Schmitt penned a virtuosic scherzo, which he later reworked as the second movement of his orchestral *In Memoriam*, dedicated to the memory of his teacher.

Ahead of these *hommages* are the nine *Préludes* Fauré composed between autumn 1909 and summer 1910. The first *Prélude* suggests some overflow from the song cycle *La chanson d'Ève*, which Fauré was then completing; No. 2 is a whirling toccata and No. 3 a ghostly barcarolle. The lilting No. 4 is overtaken by the propulsive upward motion of No. 5, whose restlessness suddenly subsides in the gently folklike coda. No. 6 is a quietly virtuosic study in counterpoint (it maintains a rigorous canon at the octave), while the rippling textures of No. 7 echo many of Fauré's *mélodies* of the early 1900s. No. 8 is a vigorous scherzo, and the chorale textures of the elegiac No. 9 recall the expressive chromaticism of Bach in E-minor mode.

Like that last *Prélude*, Fauré's *Pavane* evokes a bygone age, in the early 18th-century tradition of the *fête galante* (the courtly festivities depicted in the paintings of Antoine Watteau). Originally conceived for orchestra, it is heard tonight as Fauré himself often performed it, for solo piano: Adrian Boult left a vivid account of the wit and dancing humour of the composer's renditions in the London salons of the 1890s.

Fauré was a chronic doodler, and many of his manuscripts show patterns and even portraits scribbled in margins. The coda of the *Pavane* suggests the same sort of creative impulse: the arching melody contracts to oscillating F sharps and G sharps, above a

quasi-improvisatory sequence of chromatic harmonies. Curiously, that same 'doodling' motif can be heard in the *Ballade* Fauré composed a decade earlier, where it assumes a structural importance that far outweighs its seeming simplicity.

Fauré appears to have first conceived his *Ballade* in the late 1870s as a series of related short pieces, rather in the tradition of Schumann. But in a letter of September 1879, he explained that the central B-major allegro had become 'a kind of alliance between [piano pieces] nos. 2 and 3. That is to say, by using *new* but *old* methods I have found a way of developing the phrase of no. 2 [the E-flat minor allegro moderato] into a sort of interlude, and at the same time stating the premises of no. 3 [the concluding allegro moderato, with its bird-call trills] in such a way that the three pieces become one. It has thus turned into a Fantasy rather out of the usual way.'

Fauré's title tacitly acknowledges the influence of Chopin, a legacy that betrays itself not just in aspects of the pianistic writing but in the sophisticated development and integration of different strands of melodic material across contrasting sections: the 'doodling' andante motif generates the transitional passages bookending the restless allegro, before finally unfurling into the swooping stepwise motive first heard in the E-flat minor section.

In his 1922 survey of Fauré's piano music, written for *La revue musicale*, Alfred Cortot described the *Ballade* as 'Modulations, rather than variations, within the same poetic state [...] in which fantasy adorns itself with a rigorous concern for integrity and proportion'. Fauré's *Thème et variations* Cortot deemed his 'most significant' work for piano, 'thanks not just to its proportions, but to its character and beauty.' Fauré's stately but energetic theme is followed by 11 variations that span the gamut of 19th-century pianism, the increasingly virtuosic figurations culminating in the flying scherzo of the tenth variation. The serenely passionate eleventh suggests a closing homage to Schumann (whose *Études symphoniques*, in the same key of C-sharp minor, surely served as one of Fauré's models). 'I don't know if the piece is good but I'm sure I'm not surprising you by saying it's very difficult!' wrote Fauré to a friend in September 1895.

Tonight's programme thus unites Fauré's compositional inheritance with the rich diversity of his legacy. His generous musicianship is eloquently captured in a note he sent to Ravel in October 1922, thanking him for his *Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré*. 'I have watched your progress, dear friend, since the [Conservatoire]', he wrote, 'and I am happier than you can imagine in the place you have attained, so brilliantly and so rapidly. It brings your old professor much joy and pride.'

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