

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 5 November 2024  
7.30pm

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

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Dolly Suite Op. 56 (1894-6)

*I. Berceuse • II. Mi-a-ou • III. Le jardin de Dolly •  
IV. Kitty-valse • V. Tendresse • VI. Le pas  
espagnol*

George Enescu (1881-1955)

Pièce sur le nom de Fauré (1922)

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Berceuse sur le nom de Gabriel Fauré (1922) *arranged by  
Lucien Garban for solo piano*

Charles Koechlin (1867-1950)

Hommage à Gabriel Fauré Op. 73bis (1922)

Gabriel Fauré

Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor Op. 117 (1921)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegro vivo*

*Interval*

Gabriel Fauré

String Quartet in E minor Op. 121 (1923-4)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Allegro*

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Many women were attracted to **Gabriel Fauré**, though in several respects he was unlucky in love. Already a shy person, he suffered psychological wounds when his engagement to Marianne Viardot was broken off after four months in 1877. In 1883 he married Marie Frémiet, the daughter of a sculptor – largely, it seems, at the urging of friends. Although the relationship was amicable and long-lasting it was not entirely fulfilling for either party. A more intimate relationship seems to have existed between Fauré and Emma Bardac, the wife of a Parisian banker. (After rendezvous with several French composers, Emma would eventually become the second Madame Debussy.)

Their affair, if that's what it was, appears to have been tolerated by the spouses of both parties. Fauré was frequently to be found within the domestic circle of the Bardacs, and was very fond of their little daughter Héléne, known as Dolly. He composed piano pieces for her, often to mark the passing of birthdays, and in 1896 he collected some of them, plus some newly composed miniatures, into a suite for piano duet. He enjoyed playing the *Dolly Suite* with Mademoiselle Bardac and other young pupils.

We need not pay too much attention to the titles of the movements, which were prompted more by Fauré's publisher than by the composer. Neither of the apparent references to a cat is authentic: *Mi-a-ou* stems from Dolly's early attempts to pronounce the name of her brother, Raoul, while the manuscript of *Kitty-valse* refers instead to 'Ketty', the Bardac's pet dog!

In 1922 the journal *La Revue musicale* published a special edition in honour of Fauré, who was by then 77 years old. To honour their master, seven of his former students from the Paris Conservatoire were invited to compose short pieces: Maurice Ravel, Georges Enescu, Louis Aubert, Florent Schmitt, Charles Koechlin, Paul Ladmirault and Jean Roger-Ducasse. After publication in the magazine, the pieces were performed in December 1922 at the Salle du Conservatoire.

Having approved the project, Fauré had suggested that the pieces should draw on a theme from his 'tragédie lyrique' *Prométhée*, but the composers took the more cheerful option of basing their themes on the letters of the great man's name translated into musical notes. In his *Pièce*, **George Enescu** repeats the motif a dozen times, but it is so well integrated into the texture that it is almost hidden. **Ravel's** *Berceuse* was originally for violin and piano; the composer was due to play the keyboard part in the Paris concert but overslept, which is somewhat ironic as the title means 'lullaby'. **Charles Koechlin** was one of Fauré's more mature students, entrusted with assisting the aged composer with matters of orchestration. He later orchestrated his own graceful *Hommage*.

Fauré's Second Cello Sonata was composed between February and November 1921, the year the composer turned 75. He remained revered and indeed loved within France. In 1922 a grand concert was given in his honour at the Sorbonne, which must have brought genuine comfort

to a man in severely failing health; though poignantly, since his afflictions included deafness, he would have heard nothing of his own music.

The first performance of this sonata, by Gérard Hekking and Alfred Cortot in May 1922, provided further opportunity for fellow musicians to express their gratitude and affection towards the old man. The composer Vincent d'Indy wrote to Fauré to say that he was still under the music's spell, citing the vivaciousness of the finale and adding, 'How lucky you are to stay so young!'

Although the harmonies throughout the sonata have all the flavour and subtlety the composer's admirers relish, there is a less-typical openness (in several senses) about this music. As a result the unending flow of gorgeous, heartfelt melody never cloys.

Fauré completed his only String Quartet on 11 September 1924. He was 79 years old and his hearing was now so badly distorted that he turned down the offer of a private performance. Instead he asked for the work to be played first to a carefully chosen group of friends. They could decide whether it was worthy of publication and public performance.

Composition of this last completed work had been sporadic. In the late summer of 1923 Fauré began tentatively to assemble sketches. As was his common practice, he started by composing the central slow movement. Thus it constituted the true heart of the Quartet, helping to shape the outer movements and determine their character.

Towards the end of the year he commenced work on the first movement, making use of thematic material he had written some 45 years earlier for an abandoned violin concerto. It was not until the following summer that the finale was composed. For a while he toyed with the idea of adding a scherzo, but decided it was not needed. A few weeks after finishing the String Quartet, Fauré succumbed to double pneumonia. Though there was brief hope that he might pull through, he passed away on 4 November 1924.

It is perhaps best to prepare for hearing this work by contemplating its movements in the order that Fauré composed them. The central *Andante* does not follow any conventional formal pattern. Instead it rises and falls according to its own inspiration. 'Ethereal' and 'sublime' are the adjectives most often used to describe it, and its luminosity might conceivably be that of a world to come. The first movement prepares us for it by keeping a foothold in sonata form, though the use of modal writing rather than solid tonality means it could not be called earthbound. The finale also has sonata form as its basis; its joyful lightness is a reminder that the physical realm has its own pleasures to sustain us.

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