

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 9 February 2025
7.30pm

Après Fauré

Brad Mehldau piano

Brad Mehldau (b.1970)

Prelude

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Nocturne No. 4 in E-Flat Major, Op. 36 (c.1884)

Brad Mehldau

Caprice

Gabriel Fauré

Nocturne No. 7 in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 74 (1898)

Brad Mehldau

Nocturne

Gabriel Fauré

Nocturne No. 12 in E Minor, Op. 107 (1915)

Gabriel Fauré

Nocturne No. 13 in B Minor, Op. 119 (1921)

Brad Mehldau

Vision

Gabriel Fauré

III. Adagio from Piano Quartet No. 2 in G Minor,
Op. 45 (c. 1887)

Interval

Pieces to be announced from the stage.



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Fauré, the Quiet Revolutionary

A composer's late output can be a testament to their unceasing creativity in the face of physical decline and impending demise. If not an outright victory over mortality, it offers consolation, in a kinship that passes through the boundary of time and death. The listener and the great ghost silently communicate: "You are there; I am here, yet we are linked." There is a quiet poetic justice.

The link, of course, is the enduring transcendence of the music itself. On the one hand, it may breathe life-affirming beauty; or it may transmit the Sublime: a counterweight to beauty which affirms our transience. In such music and art, we sense a large and fathomless eternal presence, one which may terrify us in its annihilatory capability, or at least shake us from easy beliefs. If, upon this apprehension, we search back for the consolation of beauty, it is still there, but tempered by awe. Beauty affirms life, but beauty is temporary, because – we are temporary. Death lies within it already. Depending on our metaphysical leanings, we may or may not call that "just", but one thing is sure: this admix of beauty and death is strongly poetic.

In the negotiation between beauty and sublimity, certain late works may tilt to the latter, in what seems like a renunciation. If we know the composer's earlier output already, and love it with our hearts, we may feel perplexed, or even betrayed – where is that great sunny ghost who consoled me? What we have instead is music that breathes austerity and weirdness all at once. The most familiar model for that uneasy phenomenon is Beethoven, in music like his last String Quartets. Fauré's late music shares this quality.

Gabriel Fauré, who was born in 1845 and died in 1924, composed 13 Nocturnes over a span of 36 years, the first in 1875 and the last in 1921. One can hear that he already displays his own voice in No. 4, but we feel Chopin's presence, perhaps recalling the famous Nocturne Opus 9, No. 2 in the same key of E-flat. Fauré moved away from the great predecessor, but in a different manner than some of his contemporaries who also wrote piano music that extended from Chopin's language. Namely, we never hear a system with Fauré. The writer Italo Calvino posited "a method subtle and flexible enough to be the same thing as an absence of any method whatsoever." Fauré attained that in his final two Nocturnes included here. They are one-offs, completely unique and unrepeatable. In considering his music on the centennial year of his death, this invites the question: What is Fauré's legacy? It's a subject I've taken up more than once with other musicians who are passionate about his music, and we have remarked with some puzzlement that Fauré

is not as familiar a name as his younger peers, Debussy and Ravel. There are indeed a handful of well-known classics, like the beloved Requiem, the Pavane, and songs like 'Après un rêve' and 'Clair de lune'. Yet in my observation attending concerts for a few decades, his piano music does not appear on programs with regularity.

Part of the reason may be that it is not overtly virtuosic. Another reason may be that Fauré has been what is sometimes called "historically unlucky." Although they both rejected the designation in reference to their music, Debussy and Ravel are regarded as exemplars of French Impressionism in their field, which presents itself now as a singular entity – a moment in which music and visual art aligned in a particular cultural locus. Posterity favors the umbrella of such a clear historical narrative, one which presents us with a clean break from the past – a rupture, followed by a revolutionary new language which changed everything thereafter. We know that the actual unfolding of creative history never operates like this, that it's more like series of perpetually overlapping streams.

Yet we may be seduced by the bite-sized edification of such an account. In this case, it invokes a quality we call "modernism." We associate that quality with Debussy and Ravel, and we do not as readily with Fauré. We must be careful not to romanticize our notions of modernism, for in doing so we risk missing what is modern – that is, perpetually modern, modern still to our ears today, if we pay attention. There is much to find, in this regard, in Fauré's music.

In considering Fauré's later oeuvre, we might look for another word than "modern", with all its baggage of historicism, to describe his particular innovation: freedom, understood in that way that Calvino imagined – freedom from strict adherence to the rules of tonality, but, just as much, freedom from an obligation to suspend or renounce a tonality which would fashion a wordless narrative through its flux of tension and resolution. Such a renunciation become orthodoxy in the 20th century.

As an example of that freedom, consider the 12th Nocturne, included here, written in 1915. In one regard, we may also call Fauré historically lucky, in that he lived a long life. He began as Debussy, Ravel and Satie's predecessor, but at this point is their contemporary. Debussy's use of the whole-tone scale in his Prelude, 'Voiles' is perhaps a useful point of comparison. He achieved a new kind of stasis in this piano piece, which rests in a strange non-diatonic tonality. Jazz musicians, attracted by his music, would say that Debussy lets himself "hang out" in the whole-tone mode, in the way Miles Davis and others would go on to improvise on a modal canvas, suspending

harmonic movement in a way that allowed for both further abstraction and more simplicity.

Fauré flirts with Debussy's new kind of stasis in his Nocturne, yet these passages arrive in a maelstrom of heightened tension in the Nocturne – that is, as an outcome of harmonic movement, not stasis. There are two urges co-mingling here: one is a late-Romantic one in which chromatic movement approaches a point of saturation, the other is a vision of the point after saturation. The left hand in these passages, meanwhile, is close in shape to the melody of Thelonious Monk's 'Epistrophy', and for this listener, taken alone, has a blues character. Fauré bit me so strongly when I first discovered him because of the maximalist freedom on display here. He extends the grand-narrative Romantic piano tradition from Chopin, Schumann, Liszt, and Brahms, and at the same time announces an unmistakably French kind of modernism – one that anticipates jazz harmony and improvisational ethos. There is so much in this one piece.

The final 13th Nocturne is a genre in itself. Its opening page presents us with a harmonic landscape that has no corollary, even in his own work. With its mix of crunchy chromaticism and not-quite-parallel ascending triads, this music reminds us of nothing else – not even, indeed, Fauré's own earlier output. More strikingly, though, it has led nowhere else, in an immediately discernible sense. Far from being a pejorative statement, this quality embodies the quiet revolution that Fauré achieved. No composer after him wrote piano music which sounds like this, in the way, for example, that Chopin echoes in Scriabin, Rachmaninov, and Fauré himself. If a composer's greatness is commonly measured in how apparent

their influence is, here the opposite is true: the music is too singular, and remains unassimilable, affirming its genius. In this late Nocturne, weirdness is never trivial, and austerity never confining. If the sublime foreshadows our mortality, this music might communicate the austerity of death – Fauré's as it approached him, but also the apprehension of our own. We find a kinship with the composer finally, in the form of a question that he tossed off into the future, to us.

I have composed four pieces 'Après Fauré' to accompany Fauré's music, to share the way I have engaged with Fauré's question, with you the listener. This format is similar to my 'After Bach' project. The connections are less overt, but Fauré's harmonic imprint is on all four. There is also a textural influence, in terms of how he presented his musical material pianistically – he exploited the instrument's sonority masterfully, as an expressive means. So, for example, in my first 'Prelude', melody is welded to a continuous arpeggiation, both part of it and hovering above it; in my 'Nocturne', it is possible to hear the harkening chordal approach in the opening of Fauré's No. 12.

The first half of the program ends with a reduction of an excerpt from the Adagio movement of the Piano Quartet in G Minor, Opus 74. This music is quintessential Fauré, in its ability to draw the listener into what feels like a waking dream, a consoling reverie that gains expressive power in its delicate ephemerality. It is mysterious and bewitching.

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