GABRIEL FAURÉ, A RE-APPRAISAL

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GABRIEL FAURÉ is known to the general public – and, indeed to most musicians – through a mere handful of works, all written before his forty-fifth year. These include the *First Violin Sonata,* the two *Piano Quartets,* the *Requiem* and a scant dozen songs and instrumental pieces. The all but complete oblivion into which the works of his last thirty-five years have fallen cannot altogether be blamed on our own times. It is not a case of their having once been admired and subsequently forgotten. Already with *La Bonne Chanson,* composed about 1891, his following had begun to dwindle. Even so staunch an admirer as Saint-Saëns was scandalized by its liberties, declaring he could not understand a note of it. This, however, was an expert's reaction. Fauré never scandalized the public as Ravel and Debussy did. Each important new work that followed *La Bonne Chanson* was heard by willing, but ever less perceptive ears. Those who knew might be shocked by his novel harmonies. Those who did not know were baffled or merely bored. In this respect Fauré's case somewhat resembles that of Henry James, whose view of life as expressed in his later novels was attacked by H. G. Wells for being somehow dangerous and subversive. James replied that the menace could not be very great since so few people read his books.

Unlike James, however, Fauré had a wife and family to support; and discouraging as the public's attitude of respectful apathy towards all but his early works must have been, it had at least the material advantage of not barring his way to official recognition. There were enemies who tried to block his appointment as Director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1905. But these again were among men who knew; and no doubt it was hopeless to try to dramatize the disturbing tendencies in *La Bonne Chanson* for the benefit of the politicians who had the final say; they probably knew little of Fauré's music outside of *Les Roses d'Ispahan;* and what difference could they see, except that *La Bonne Chanson* was not quite so pretty?

At all events, Fauré enjoyed all the honors that the Third Republic reserved for men who attained distinction without arousing suspicion. He was *Membre de l'Institut,* chief organist at La Madeleine, and for ten years chief critic on the conservative *Figaro.* The prevailing notion of Fauré as an innocuous charmer was quickly dispelled when he assumed his post at the Conservatoire. Inviting such storm-centers as Claude Debussy to sit on the Board of Advisors, he began at once to make life unbearable for all those professors who assured him that "the main function of a Conservatory, as its name implies, is to *conserve* tradition." Hardly a day passed without a resignation or a dismissal, and Fauré acquired the nickname of "Robespierre."

This nonconformity was less apparent in his writings for the *Figaro.* Although not without a characteristic charm, his articles contain little more than average French opinions expressed with average French elegance. He was bowled over by *Parsifal,* dazzled by Strauss and chilled to the bone by the *Third Symphony* of Brahms. That in ten years he should never have written a word about Debussy is difficult to account for. His many occupations may have interfered with his attending concerts at which the latter's music was performed. On the other hand, Fauré had no taste for polemics; and though he recognized the genius of *Pelléas,* he must have been keenly aware of the challenge to his own esthetic that it implied. To criticize Debussy's esthetic would have involved defining his own.

Fauré was no man of letters, still less a philosopher. Abstract terms meant little to him. About the only guiding general principle that has been ascribed to him is a somewhat vague and thoroughly un-metaphysical statement to the effect that "composing consists in imagining everything above what *is,* everything that transcends reality" – which, though obviously well-meant, is not particularly helpful and possibly the reverse of true – at any rate the kind of remark that is dragged out of a man accustomed to stick to his muttons. The ground and granite of his thought was music; and the stage of evolution at which he found it was, to him, clearly something *given,* an ineluctable point of departure for the development of his own genius, rather than something basically arbitrary and fortuitous which he might reasonably discard.

In one sense, to be sure, Fauré's approach to music was no less instinctive than Debussy's. The rational element in Fauré is more easily perceived, which no doubt explains why he could be so daring in his harmonies without upsetting the public. But his music's reassuringly

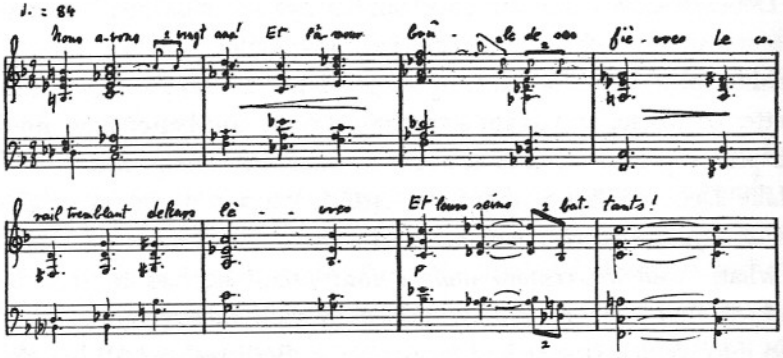
rational air derived from a purely instinctive acceptance of rational procedures, rather than from any abstract principle which he could formally defend. In this sense, therefore, one might say that Fauré's instinct operated at a deeper level than Debussy's, in that Fauré instinctively adopted a rational approach, whereas Debussy rationalized an instinctive one. The latter hinted as much in *M. Croche,* where, apropos of the emptiness and tedium that he finds in so much of the music of our civilization, Debussy makes the attractive but always specious plea for a return to Nature and the charm of primitive, unschooled melody. This is the bad philosophy that is so alluring to good poets. To Fauré, civilization, for better or worse, was again something *given;* and better have no formulated philosophical attitude towards it than the wrong one.

Like Debussy, but without the latter's conscious aim at originality, or his dandyism, Fauré never allowed external influences to divert him from what, *"tout doucement mais à tout prix,"* he had to say. It was natural, at that time in France, that two such men should have been pressed into writing operas and more operas. Both resisted all but the one compelling urge; Debussy's comparatively youthful triumph in this form being such that a sequel was unthinkable; Fauré refusing to be drawn into the operatic field until, in his fifty-second year, he was given the libretto of *Pénélope.*

For all its obvious limitations and alas! its dramatic absurdity, one can easily appreciate how the subject must at once have fired Fauré's imagination. Despite the frequent clumsiness of René Fauchois' text, the portrait of the grief-stricken Penelope emerges in clean and telling lines. Like a Greek funereal bas-relief, it is noble without being pompous, graceful but not soft, sorrowing without self-pity, and single-minded without being a bore – as ideal an embodiment, in fact, of Fauré's esthetic as the poetic and unpredictable Mélisande was of Debussy's. Fauré devoted seven years to the composition of *Pénélope,* lavishing all his care and tenderness and patience on the central figure. The result is something so deeply felt and sustained that one wonders how so intimate a portrait could ever make its way across the footlights. Yet this opera used to be given fairly regularly at the Comique during the '20's. There always seemed to be some prominent primadonna at hand who wanted to sing it, and as she would have a large following of admirers who were glad to hear her in any rôle, the house was sure of being filled. Whether or not the public ever fully appreciated the music itself seems doubtful. In any case, the opera's main chance of survival

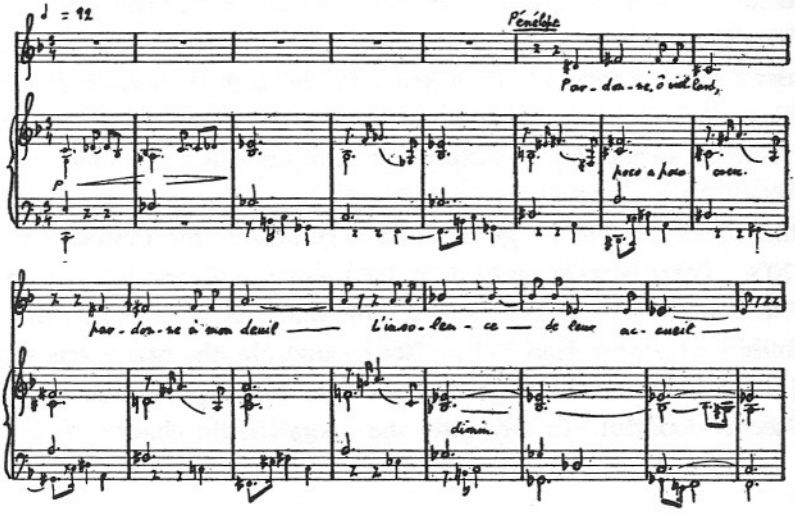
would appear to be through excerpts given in concert form. Such a beginning was made in New York this winter, and it is to be done again in a more extended way at the Fauré Festival celebrating his centenary in Cambridge next fall.

Here are two brief quotations, the first consisting of eight measures that are sung in chorus by the suitors and serving-maids before joining a banquet off-stage:



These exquisite harmonies, believe it or not, are intended as the prelude to a wild party! (Perhaps they afford a clue to Fauré's above-quoted dictum that "composing consists in imagining everything . . . that transcends reality"!)

The second follows immediately after. Penelope, left alone with Ulysses whom she does not recognize in his old man's disguise, apologizes for the insolent behaviour of the suitors. It is only one of a hundred examples that might be chosen to illustrate the subtle simplicity of Fauré's thought, the unexpectedness that is yet always logical, and, most of all, how much he could say with few notes:



Just as Bach's two-part inventions are small sparks that could have been struck only from a mighty intellect, so the delicate shift of harmony at the entrance of the voice in this passage, though a small detail, has a freedom of inflection that goes only with the greatest mastery.

I mentioned Penelope's single-mindedness as one of the traits of character that made her such an appropriate subject for Fauré. In an age when composers could make sizable reputations for themselves by their skill in orchestration alone, Fauré was almost lackadaisical about this branch of his art. No one seems to know who is responsible for the orchestration of *Pénélope* – the secret has been well guarded – but it is fairly certain that Fauré did little of it himself. He was a busy man and first things had to come first. He evidently regarded instrumentation as something relatively non-essential. Admirable as his quartets and quintets are from the point of view of balanced sonority, one would search them in vain for anything like a purely instrumental "effect." Uniquely pre-occupied with essentials, or what he regarded as such, he was moreover content with established structural forms and with a rhythmic and ornamental style that is apt and precise but rarely startling. To project melodic lines that were clean and free, generous and fervent, and that gave full scope to his astoundingly flexible harmonic sense, approximately sums up the aim and achievement of a musician who could truly "be bounded in a nutshell and count himself a king of infinite space."