

PROGRAM NOTES by Paul Schiavo

GABRIEL FAURÉ

Requiem, Op. 48

BORN: May 12, 1845, in Pamiers, France

DIED: November 4, 1924, in Paris

WORK COMPOSED: 1886–90, 1900

WORLD PREMIERE: Although this work was heard in a preliminary and incomplete form in January 1888, in Paris, under Fauré's direction, its premiere in its complete and definitive version took place in Paris on July 12, 1900, under the direction of Paul Taffanel.

Gabriel Fauré's Requiem is among the most affecting musical settings of the Latin *Missa pro defunctis*, the Mass for the Dead, and its tone is unlike any of the compositions that may be considered its peers. The Requiems of Verdi and Berlioz are spectacular works that address the notions of death, resurrection and final judgment in grand, even theatrical, tones. Smaller in scale, Mozart's is filled with great poignancy.

Fauré, by contrast, composed a hymn of solace and supplication, music to comfort mourners rather than impress upon them the enormity of death. It is a less dramatic, though in no way less moving, setting of the text, something Fauré himself recognized when he wrote of the composition to the violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, claiming that "*Elle est d'un caractère doux comme moi-meme*" ("It is gentle in character, like myself").

This mildness results as much from what the work does not say as what it does. Among other things, Fauré omits entirely the *Dies irae* sequence, which normally follows the *Kyrie*, and which brought forth such terrifying music from Mozart and Verdi. Similarly, he deletes the *Tuba mirum*, the occasion for mighty antiphonal trumpeting in Berlioz's Requiem. Instead, Fauré chooses those passages of the Mass for the Dead that serve as prayer and consolation. His theme is always "requiem," the blessed rest of those whose life's journey is over.

It is understandable that Fauré chose to temper his work in this way. The awesome vision of the Last Judgement would have appealed little to a man whose aesthetic sensibilities were as refined as Fauré's, and who, moreover, was not a believer. Although he served for many years as organist at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris, the composer was openly agnostic. His skepticism inclined him toward the more generally spiritual aspects of the Mass — whose expression best suited his art, in any case — rather than to suggestive rendering of its scriptural passages. So while his Requiem is certainly a composition for the Church, the spirit of humanism may be heard, at least subliminally, throughout the score.

But even if Fauré's faith was far from complete, the sentiments conveyed in his Requiem were nevertheless personal and authentic. He began earnest work on this piece in 1886, shortly after the death of his father, and finished it at the end of the following year. Part of the music was heard at the Madeleine in January 1888. Fauré subsequently revised the orchestration, and the composition was heard in its definitive version in 1900. It also was performed at the composer's own memorial service, in 1924. It stands as one of Fauré's greatest achievements, which is to say one of the finest works in all of French music.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Paradoxically, Fauré's characteristic use of understatement — manifested in modest themes, delicate textures, harmonic subtlety and transparent orchestration — accounts for much of this music's power. His melodies, while exquisite, are simple and chant-like (there is nothing resembling operatic writing in the vocal parts of the work). The orchestra and organ are used with admirable restraint to accompany the singers. The few forceful passages are made all the more effective, and the entire score all the more touching, for this generally quiet eloquence.

*Scored for 2 flutes, 2 clarinets and 2 bassoons ; 4 horns, 2 trumpets and 3 trombones ; timpani, harp, organ and strings.*

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