

28. Fauré's Requiem

SEVERAL of the world's greatest composers were actually sceptics or non-believers even though many of them wrote religious music. This is quite understandable. Most employers of musicians and composers in the past were courts or churches and the tradition was passed on from father to son. The composer might be ordered to write a *Requiem Mass* for a dead count or cleric, or even pope or emperor.

Take Mozart. He was certainly no orthodox Catholic, having in 1784 joined the Freemasons who were condemned by the Church which threatened any Catholic member with excommunication. Although Mozart wrote religious pieces, he also wrote works like *The Magic Flute* (along with librettist Emanuel Schikaneder, also a Freemason), which is greatly influenced by Enlightenment ideas. In this opera the Queen of the Night can be taken to represent the obscurantist Catholic Church, while her antagonist Sarastro symbolises the enlightened sovereign who rules according to reason, intelligence and brotherhood. In the story, mankind progresses from chaos, through superstition to Enlightenment, where "the earth is a heavenly kingdom and mortals like gods".

Or take Beethoven. His Choral Symphony testifies to his enlightened humanism. His symphonies generally are widely recognised as the supreme musical expressions of the indomitable power of the human spirit. God is largely absent. Although brought up a Catholic, Beethoven never attended religious services. Haydn thought he was an atheist. To his friend and biographer Anton Schindler, he was a deist.

When another friend Ignaz Moscheles wrote at the end of his arrangement of *Fidelio* (1805), "Fine, with God's help", Beethoven added, "O man, help thyself". Sir George Macfarren, the English composer and musicologist, speaks of him as a 'free thinker', saying the *Mass in C* "might scarcely have proceeded from an



entirely orthodox thinker". As John Suchet says (*Beethoven: The Man Revealed*) in the *Heiligenstadt Testament* "God gets barely a look in", and when it happens the reference is to 'Divinity' or 'Providence'. On his death-bed Beethoven reportedly said: "Applaud, my friends, the comedy is over", and he clenched his fist at the end, as if in defiance of a deity.

As well as these two musical giants, there was Berlioz. He wrote a *Grande Messe des Morts*, but he often stated in his letters that he was an atheist. Shortly before his death, he wrote, "I believe nothing". Dvorak said the same of Brahms, who wrote *A German Requiem*: "Such a man, such a fine soul – and he believes in nothing!" His biographer Jan Swafford writes: "He was a humanist and an agnostic, and his requiem was going to express that". Brahms said that it might as well be called 'A Human Requiem'.

Debussy described himself as a 'neo-pagan' who made 'mysterious nature' his religion. Ravel called himself an atheist and refused to have a religious funeral. According to Bertrand Russell, who knew him at Cambridge, Vaughan Williams was 'the most frightful atheist'. Delius was just as emphatic: "the whole traditional Christian concept of life is false", he wrote.

And what of Gabriel Fauré (left)? Certainly his career was in church music. He was born in 1845 near Pamiers in south-west France, about 45 miles south of Toulouse. When his mother was pregnant with him, she apparently told friends that the baby was not particularly wanted, but would be brought up the same as the five others. Until he was four he was sent out to a foster-nurse. Then his father was appointed head of a teacher training school at Montauzy, near Foix, about 12 miles farther south, and the whole family moved to live in the school.

Fauré wrote of his childhood: "I grew up, a rather quiet, well-behaved child, in an area of great beauty". But the one thing he could remember clearly was the harmonium, used to accompany plainsong in the old chapel adjoining the school, which he played at every opportunity. It is said that a blind woman heard the eight-year-old boy playing this pump organ one day and advised his father to send him to Paris to study music.

When he was nine, his father did exactly that, taking him to the newly opened Niedermeyer boarding school in Paris. Niedermeyer was so impressed that he offered him a place free of charge. The school was based around religious music, and Fauré's father felt that it would make a cultured man out of his son and equip him for a job as organist or choir-master.

Fauré boarded at the school for 11 years, thanks to a scholarship from the Bishop of Pamiers. When Niedermeyer died in 1861, Camille Saint-Saëns, then aged 25, was appointed as the piano teacher. He became Fauré's mentor and friend, introducing him to the music of Liszt, Schumann and Wagner, and helping him to progress in his career throughout his life.

By the time he left the school in 1865 at the age of 20, Fauré had already composed a number of pieces, the most notable being the *Cantique de Jean Racine* in that year, for which he won a Premier Prix.

This short work anticipates his *Requiem* in its extraordinary mixture of purity, sensual beauty and serenity.

Fauré's first job was as the organist at the church of St Sauveur in Rennes. He spent 4 years there, supplementing his meagre income by taking private pupils in piano lessons. But he was bored: provincial life did not suit him, and the local priest suspected him of doubting the faith. He had already been in trouble for using sermon time as a smoking break, but he went too far in 1870 when he turned up for a service in his evening clothes after an all-night ball, and was promptly dismissed.

He returned to Paris where Saint-Saëns helped him to find another job as organist at Notre-Dame de Clignancourt. He remained there for only a few months – this time he was dismissed for daring to miss a service to hear Meyerbeer's opera *Les Huguenots*.

After a stint in the army during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, Fauré escaped the Paris Commune by going to Switzerland to teach at his old school which had evacuated there. Once the French capital returned to normal, he went back and found a job as second organist at the church of St Sulpice, where the first organist was Charles-Marie Widor. In 1874 he left St Sulpice to deputise for Saint-Saëns at the Madeleine, then Paris's most distinguished and fashionable church. When Saint-Saëns resigned in 1877 Théodore Dubois succeeded him as organist and Fauré became choir-master. He soon began to acquire a reputation as a composer.

According to Fauré himself, "My *Requiem* was composed for no reason – for pleasure, if I may venture to say so". Nevertheless, the death of his father in 1885 and his mother two years later may well have given him impetus. He began the work in the late summer of 1887 and his mother died on 31st December. The first performance came in the Madeleine a couple of weeks later in January 1888 at the funeral for a well-known architect. After the ceremony, the priest summoned the choir-master and demanded: "What was that mass for the dead you've just conducted?" Fauré explained that it was his own work. "Monsieur Fauré", sighed the priest, "we

don't need all these novelties: the Madeleine's repertoire is quite rich enough".

In a sense, the priest was correct because there is nothing quite like Fauré's *Requiem* in the history of religious choral music. Here are his words in an interview in 1902: "It has been said that my *Requiem* does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But this is how I see death: as a happy deliverance... perhaps my instinct led me to stray from the established path after all those years accompanying funerals! I'd had them up to here. I wanted to do something different".

Fauré subverts the traditional liturgical text of the Catholic Mass for the Dead in a number of ways. The original 1888 version had one soloist, a small orchestra with no tutti violins, no *Dies Irae* and only five movements: *Introit et Kyrie*, *Sanctus*, *Pie Jesu*, *Agnus Die* and *In Paradisum*. The emphasis is on peaceful acceptance and release. The music is serene, gentle and comforting. There is no fear of death such as

"It has said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called

we find in the thundering *Dies Irae* of Verdi's *Requiem* or outpouring of grief like that in the *Lacrymosa* of Mozart's *Requiem*. Instead there is a restrained and dignified acceptance of mortality. As he put it, "everything I managed to entertain by way of religious illusion I put into my *Requiem*, which is in fact dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest".

In 1893 Fauré conducted an expanded version, including two further movements, the *Offertorium*, written in 1889, and *Libera me*, which he had written in 1877 as a baritone solo. In the *Offertorium*, the plea for the souls of the *faithful* departed is changed by Fauré to refer to *all* the departed, reflecting his humanistic ideas. The addition of the *Libera me* as the penultimate movement – probably included as a concession to the clergy – adds a moment of darkness but is then followed by the burst of soaring light in the final *In Paradisum*.

Fauré's *Requiem* was an evolving work. In 1900 a third version with full orchestra received its première. This was possibly at the request of the publisher who felt that it would receive more performances as a concert rather than church piece. Whether Fauré or an assistant reorchestrated it is not clear, but certainly it became a great success. Inevitably, though, there was also criticism. Fauré was even charged with paganism. He replied that "pagan does not necessarily mean 'irreligious'. Anyway, I cannot deny that pagan antiquity has always held great appeal for my imagination".

In 1896 Fauré was appointed organist at the Madeleine and Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire, of which he became director in 1905. He died in 1924, aged 79, and was given a state funeral at the Madeleine. His works include more than 100 songs, song cycles, scores of piano pieces, sonatas, chamber music, incidental music for several plays, and two operas.

In a biography, his son Philippe says that his father was neither a believer nor an atheist but a sceptic. We have seen that his life as an organist and choir-master was mapped out from an early age, but he transcended it in music of universal significance, not least in his *Requiem*. It fulfils his own wish that "art, and above all music, exists to elevate us as far as possible above everyday existence".

FAURÉ'S REQUIEM: SELECTED RECORDINGS

- ANSERMET (Decca, 1960, 1999)
- DUTOIT (Decca, 1988)
- EQUILBEY (Naive, 2008)
- GARDINER (Philips, 1994)
- HERREWEGHE (Harmonia Mundi, 2002)
- RUTTER (Collegium, 1984)
- SHORT (LSO Live, 2012)

Equilbey, Gardiner, Rutter and Short basically use the paired-down 1893 version; Ansermet, Dutoit and Herreweghe use the 1900 version. They and Equilbey have a more 'French' pronunciation of the Latin, whereas Gardiner, Rutter and Short have an Anglicised Latin. The 'French' recordings tend to sound more 'authentic' and are generally slower, infusing the music with a more sensual lilt.