

## Fauré's Requiem

### ONE-MINUTE NOTES

#### **Maurice Ravel:** *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin* pays homage to the French Baroque composer, but its balance and delicacy are Mozartean. Woodwinds emulate a rippling brook in the Prelude. Precise accents and piquant harmonies characterize the Forlane. Ravel's Menuet mixes tenderness with melancholy, while the Rigaudon closes *Le Tombeau* with verve and flair.

#### **George Walker:** *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra*

George Walker's *Lilacs for Voice and Orchestra* is a setting of four stanzas from Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Whitman's poem was an elegy to Abraham Lincoln, written in summer 1865, a few months after Lincoln's assassination. *Lilacs* was commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra to honor the legacy of the Black tenor Roland Hayes. Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in music for this work in 1996.

#### **Gabriel Fauré:** *Requiem*

Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* is a tender, intimate work. He did not choose to set the *Dies irae* movement that gives Mozart's and Verdi's *Requiem*s so much of their drama and intensity. Instead, Fauré chose a gentler path. He described the work as a lullaby of death, reflecting his personal view of death as "an aspiration toward happiness above, rather than as a painful experience." The music is lovely and soothing, its movements balanced. The central *Pie Jesu* for soprano solo serves as a fulcrum to the preceding and following movements. It is easy to understand why this work is so beloved to choruses and audiences alike.

#### **Maurice Ravel:** *Le Tombeau de Couperin*

##### **Maurice Ravel**

**Born:** March 7, 1875, in Ciboure, Basses-Pyrenées, France

**Died:** December 28, 1937, in Paris, France

**Composed:** 1914-17 for piano; orchestral transcription in 1919

**World Premiere:** February 28, 1920 in Paris

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** 1935-36 season

**Duration:** 17 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, harp and strings.

France has rich cultural traditions: in cuisine, language, viticulture and of course in the visual and performing arts. In music, France has always revered the great composers of its golden Baroque era: from Jean-Baptiste Lully in the late 17th century to François Couperin "Le Grand" and Jean-Philippe Rameau in the first half of the 18th century.

Like all his contemporaries, Maurice Ravel was educated with great respect and love for this rich musical heritage. His *Le Tombeau de Couperin* is a collection of dances and other musical forms that reached their apogee in the compositions of his Baroque predecessors. The piece originally appeared in 1917 as a six-movement suite for solo piano. Two years later, Ravel orchestrated four of its movements in the version we hear on this program..

The word *tombeau*, as its spelling suggests, means tomb or grave; however, the French term connotes 'homage' or 'tribute' as well. Ravel was paying his respects not only to Couperin, but also to French Baroque heritage. His neoclassical choice of older dance forms as an instrumental suite is an obvious bow to the earlier era. Preludes were a standard opening movement to an instrumental suite. The *forlane* is an Italian dance with possible Slavic roots as well; it is related to the gigue and passamezzo and shares their 6/8 meter. The *rigaudon* is an ancient Provençal dance that was beloved to Ravel, and the menuet needs no introduction; music-lovers encounter it regularly as the third movement of symphonies, string quartets and other multi-movement works. All three dances were popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

There is another layer of meaning in *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. Each of the movements bears a dedication to a friend of Ravel's who died in combat during the First World War. Ravel began the suite in 1914, after he had been discharged from the French military. Many of his friends were less fortunate, and by the time he completed composition of the original piano suite in 1917, French casualties were astronomical. Ravel's biographer H.H. Stuckenschmidt calls *Le Tombeau de Couperin* "a collection of idealized obituaries," and points out that a dark current of mourning underlies the superficially light strains of this lovely music. That melancholy streak is particularly evident in the two inner movements, *Forlane* and *Menuet*. Ravel's musical language is contemporary, although he adheres to the formal demands of the older dances. His remarkable

gift for orchestration brings *Le Tombeau de Couperin* vividly to life with deft touches of instrumental color, particularly in the woodwind and brass sections.

## **George Walker: *Lilacs* for Voice and Orchestra**

### **George Walker**

**Born:** June 27, 1922, in Washington D.C.

**Died:** August 23, 2018, in Montclair, New Jersey

**Composed:** 1995-1996

**World Premiere:** February 1, 1996 in Boston. Seiji Ozawa led the Boston Symphony Orchestra; the soloist was Faye Robinson

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** These performances are the Symphony's premiere

**Duration:** 15 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes, piccolo, alto flute, two oboes (second doubling English horn), two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, four trumpets, four trombones, tuba, timpani, a large percussion complement [glockenspiel, xylophone, vibraphone, chimes, triangle, tambourine, guiro, glass chimes, snare drum, cymbals, claves, wood block, temple blocks, maracas, castanets, and gong], harp, harpsichord, celeste, solo soprano and strings

It's difficult to imagine a musical pedigree more pristine than George Walker's. After graduating from high school at age 14, he attended Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio, then Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, then Rochester's Eastman School – three of America's most prestigious schools of music. At Curtis, he studied piano with Rudolf Serkin, chamber music with violist William Primrose and cellist Gregor Piatigorsky, and composition with Rosario Scalero (whose former students included Samuel Barber and Giancarlo Menotti). Walker was the first Black graduate of Curtis, with diplomas in both piano performance and composition.

Walker later refined his keyboard skills working with several internationally renowned pianists, notably the Frenchman Robert Casadesus and Britain's Clifford Curzon. He had an active career as a concert pianist in the 1940s and early 1950s, including appearances with Eugene Ormandy and The Philadelphia Orchestra and Reginald Stewart and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. Increasingly, however, Walker focused on composition, earning his DMA from the Eastman School of Music in 1956 – the first Black student to do so. Recognition of his gifts was swift and steady. He earned, in succession, fellowships from the Fulbright (1957) and Whitney (1958)

foundations. The Whitney award allowed him to travel to France for study with the legendary Nadia Boulanger at Fontainebleau, outside Paris, for two years.

Eleven years later another pair of back-to-back awards came his way: a Guggenheim fellowship in 1969 and a Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1970. During the 1960s he was a MacDowell Colony Fellow. He later received a second Guggenheim, a second Rockefeller Foundation grant, and a slew of other awards.

Walker established his reputation before *Brown v. Board of Education* and sustained it through the civil rights turmoil of the 1960s. When he died five years ago, he had been awarded six honorary doctorates, including one from Spelman College in 2001. Walker taught at several institutions of higher education, most notably Rutgers University from 1976, where he chaired the Music Department until his retirement in 1992.

In 1995, the Boston Symphony Orchestra commissioned Walker to compose a work that would honor the legacy of tenor Roland Hayes (1887-1977), who had performed his debut recital in Boston's Symphony Hall in 1917. Hayes became the first Black American to establish an international career as vocal recitalist and orchestra soloist. He was equally at home with African American spirituals and the European classical canon.

In fulfillment of the commission, Walker chose to set parts of Walt Whitman's elegy, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," written in summer 1865 as the nation mourned the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln. Whitman knew the horrors of war firsthand because he had worked as a field nurse for Union soldiers during the Civil War. Walker's music is a thoughtful and moving response to Whitman's verse.

*Lilacs* comprises four interrelated sections, which correspond to stanzas 1-3 and 13 of Whitman's poem. Three principal symbols emerge: the lilac, the star and a wood thrush. The fragrant flower represents the eternal hope of the perennial, blooming anew each spring as an affirmation of life and hope. Its heart-shaped leaves and lovely scent are reminders of the departed, and of the wonders of nature. The star is a metaphor for the slain president, who led the nation – as shepherd, if you will – through the tumult and tragedy of the war. The star becomes visible only at night when the earth is shrouded in darkness: a nation in mourning. The 'gray-brown bird,' Whitman's wood thrush, comforts the poet [the singer] with its song, though the ongoing

presence of the lilac's scent remains powerful, as does the star; both are reminders of the eternal cycle of day and night, of life, death and rebirth.

Walker uses an enormous orchestra, but with great delicacy. Rarely does it sail forth with all its power. Rather, Walker uses his expanded woodwind, brass, and percussion sections to reinforce and complement the singer. She is never overpowered by the instrumental component, soaring high above the orchestra except when the bird is singing. Hope and the melancholy despair of loss and lamentation govern the shifting moods.

The musical motives among the four sections are related. At the beginning of section four, on the text "Sing on, sing on you gray-brown bird," Walker uses the opening melodic phrase of the spiritual "Lit'l Boy, How Old Are You," which was one of Roland Hayes's recital standards. It is a subtle but effective bow to the Boston Symphony Orchestra's commission parameters. Walker presented them with a stunning lyrical masterpiece. *Lilacs* won the Pulitzer Prize in Music in 1996 (another first; he was the first Black composer to receive the music Pulitzer). The vote was unanimous, with the Pulitzer committee describing Walker's composition as "passionate and very American, . . . with a beautiful and evocative lyrical quality."

## **Gabriel Fauré: Requiem, Op. 48**

### **Gabriel Fauré**

**Born:** May 12, 1845 in Pamiers, Ariège, France

**Died:** November 4, 1924 in Paris, France

**Composed:** 1887; revised 1893 and 1900

**World Premiere:** January 16, 1888 in Paris, France

**New Jersey Symphony Premiere:** 1974-75 season

**Duration:** 36 minutes

**Instrumentation:** two flutes), two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, harp, organ, mixed chorus, solo soprano, solo baritone and strings.

The Latin *Missa pro defunctis* (Mass for the dead) has been part of the Catholic liturgy since the earliest days of Christianity. The sixteenth-century Council of Trent standardized its content, prescribing what portions of the text would be sung or spoken, and what portions could vary with

the occasion or the church calendar, as opposed to the standard, unchanging items. Beginning in the early Renaissance, composers set Requiem masses for mixed chorus, gradually expanding their settings to include instrumental accompaniment. Since the late eighteenth century, many such works have found a place in the permanent concert hall repertoire beyond the religious function that they serve in church. The Requiems of Mozart, Berlioz, Brahms, Dvořák and Verdi come immediately to mind. To these esteemed ranks must be added the stunning and ethereal Requiem of Gabriel Fauré, a perennial favorite of audiences and musicians alike.

Fauré's piece has a checkered and piecemeal history that spans nearly a quarter century. He appears to have begun work on it in 1885, shortly after his father's death on July 25. Since he had no commission to compose a Requiem, historians have assumed that he undertook the project as an expression of grief. The music took shape gradually over the next two and a half years, growing to three movements. Then the composer suffered another emotional blow. On December 31, 1887, his mother died suddenly after a short illness. During the next two weeks, Fauré worked furiously, adding an Agnus Dei by January 6, 1888 and a Sanctus by January 9. The first performance of his new composition took place on January 16 at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris, where Fauré had succeeded his friend and colleague Camille Saint-Saëns as organist in 1877; he also held the position of choir director. The occasion was a funeral for a prominent architect, M. Lesoufaché, who was a parishioner of the Madeleine.

In that premiere, the five-movement Requiem employed a small orchestra consisting of lower strings, harp and organ. The 1888 score included no violins other than one solo in the Sanctus and used kettledrums solely for the opening Kyrie. Over the next several years, Fauré continued to work on the Requiem, expanding the orchestra and adding two movements with baritone solo: the Offertorium (1889) and the Libera me (adapted from an 1877 solo for baritone and organ). Both these Latin texts are actually from the Office of the Dead, and not from the traditional Requiem Mass. In employing them, Fauré set himself apart from other French sacred choral works in the late nineteenth century. His setting of the rarely used in paradisum is another aspect that distinguished this from other composers' Requiems. The second version, which added parts for brass instruments, was presented by the Société Nationale on January 28, 1892 at the Church of St. Gervais in Paris.

The version of the Requiem that we hear this evening dates from 1900. The occasion was a performance at the *Exposition universelle* (World's Fair). At the request of his publisher, Fauré expanded the orchestra further, adding woodwinds in pairs and a complement of orchestral

violins. Their parts are minimal, for the most part doubling lines that already existed in the second version. Brass and woodwinds are often silent for whole movements, and Fauré uses full orchestra only a couple of times in the entire composition. His restraint contributes to a sense of otherworldliness in this lovely Requiem.

Noticeably absent from Fauré's Requiem is a *Dies irae* movement, customarily the most dramatic musical evocation of fire and brimstone associated with the Judgment Day. (The words "Dies illa, dies irae" occur in the Libera me movement, scored with appropriate drama, but the passage is a brief episode rather than a dramatic focal point). The absence of such drama was conscious, reflecting the composer's personal attitude toward death and the hereafter. Late in life, he wrote:

That's how I see death: as a joyful deliverance, an aspiration toward a happiness beyond the grave, rather than as a painful experience.

His music reflects this benign approach: God as forgiver, death as a release, heaven as a joy-filled, gentle and restful destination. The Requiem has an undercurrent of consolation that tempers its sadness. Despite the several versions of this work and the broad span of time during which the Requiem developed, its seven movements have a remarkable homogeneity of style. The differences in scoring are subtle from movement to movement, and carefully calculated, particularly in the judicious use of the brass. Fauré occasionally divides the chorus into five, six, or even seven parts, which enriches the texture of the vocal fabric. Similarly, he divides his lower strings, using the violins only sparingly. That heightens the ethereal beauty of the violin solo in the Sanctus and the soprano solo in the Pie Jesu, adding to the sense of transfiguration that suffuses the Requiem.