

Music from the French Cathedral

Performed

October 18, 1997

- Gabriel Fauré: [*Cantique de Jean Racine*](#)
- Lili Boulanger: [*Psaume 24*](#)
- Maurice Duruflé: [*Requiem*](#)
- Maurice Duruflé: [*Quatre Motets sur des Thèmes Gregoriens*](#)
- Francis Poulenc: [*Litanies à la Vierge Noire*](#)

Music in France is an institution as well as an art form, and this has frequently been used to promote French composers and French music. In 1871, Camille Saint-Saëns founded the Société Nationale de Musique to provide a venue for the music of younger composers including Fauré, Franck, Dukas, Lalo and Chabrier. (Saint-Saëns later resigned because he felt the Société featured too much non-French music.) The prestigious Prix de Rome was established in 1803 by L'Académie des Beaux-Arts to provide a scholarship for the best young French composer to study at the Villa Medici in Rome.

This climate of sponsorship nurtured a remarkably large and close-knit community of French composers who counted their colleagues among their greatest influences. It also gave rise to a distinctively French musical style which is perhaps best reflected in their choral music. There is an almost painterly fascination with color and image, typically applied in transparent layers by variously combining and recombining voices and groups of instruments, producing music of exceptional balance, brilliance and clarity.

Fauré: *Cantique de Jean Racine*

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was a pupil and protégé of Saint-Saëns, his piano and composition teacher at Louis Niedermeyer's École de Musique Classique et Religieuse. Fauré ultimately succeeded Saint-Saëns as choir director and later organist of the Madeleine, one of Paris's most fashionable churches. Fauré was named director of the Paris Conservatoire in 1905, a post he held for fifteen years, and he had a profound influence on generations of French composers. He reformed the curriculum, emphasizing contemporary music. He resigned from the Société Nationale in 1909 to protest its musical conservatism, and founded the rival Société Musicale Indépendante with some of his former students, including Maurice Ravel.

The *Cantique de Jean Racine* is one of Fauré's early works, written as a graduation piece from the École Niedermeyer in 1865, where it won a first prize for him in composition. It already displays what became one of his stylistic characteristics, a fixed rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment which is not varied throughout the entire piece. While this earned him some criticism, it is a device which serves to unify the music, much like a ground

bass. Fauré was evidently well satisfied with the *Cantique*, and he provided a version with string quartet in 1866, another for organ in 1876 and an orchestrated version in 1906.

L. Boulanger: *Psaume 24*

Today we associate the name Boulanger with Nadia, the influential teacher of generations of American composers who made the pilgrimage to her Paris studio. In turn of the century Paris, however, it was her younger sister Lili (1893-1918) who had garnered most of the acclaim.

The Boulanger sisters were born into a musical family. Their father, Ernest, was a professor of voice at the Conservatoire who had married one of his star pupils, and Fauré was a family friend and frequent visitor to their home. Lili was extraordinarily precocious. She astounded Fauré by sight reading some of his songs at the tender age of six. When Nadia entered the Conservatoire, Lili accompanied her, auditing Louis Vierne's organ class when she was six and Fauré's composition class when she was nine! She made her solo debut as a violinist at age eight and as a pianist at eleven.

At the age of 17, she set out on a determined course to win the Prix de Rome. (This was something of a family tradition: Ernest himself had won the award in 1835 and Nadia had placed second in 1908.) She undertook intensive private study with Paul Vidal and formally entered the Conservatoire two years later. She was forced to withdraw from the first competition due to the serious health problems which afflicted her all her life, but in 1913 she became the first woman to win the Prix de Rome, beating out older competitors including Marcel Dupré with her cantata *Faust et Hélène*.

The outbreak of World War I and Lili's poor health prevented her from studying in Rome but she maintained a steady stream of composition. She also found the time and strength to help Nadia with a humanitarian effort to take care of the families of musicians who had been conscripted into the army. Lili returned to Rome in 1916 to renew her studies, but her health failed and she returned to Paris, where she died tragically young at the age of 25.

Psaume 24 (Psalm 24) was written in 1916. With its strong rhythmic pulse and the opening male chorus replete with open fourths and fifths, it is unexpectedly martial sounding for a composer whose music generally tends to be more introspective and sparing in its use of fortissimos.

Durufilé: *Requiem* (opus 9)

Maurice Durufilé (1902-1986) belongs to that improbably large group of major French composers who were also organists, including Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Franck, Dupré and Messiaén. Like Fauré, his early training was in church music, having studied at the Rouen Cathedral choir school until he was sixteen. After two years of private organ study

with Vierne and Charles Tournemire, the most prominent organists of the day, he entered the Conservatoire in 1920, the year Fauré retired. He was an outstanding student, winning first prizes in composition, harmony, organ, accompaniment and counterpoint and fugue. As a student he had obtained posts of assistant organist with Tournemire at St. Clothilde and with Vierne at Notre Dame Cathedral and after graduation became organist at St. Étienne-du-Mont, a post he held until the end of his life. He was a brilliant organist who had an extensive performing career. He premiered Poulenc's *Organ Concerto* in 1939, advising the composer on registrations. He joined the faculty of the Conservatoire in 1942, first substituting for Dupré in his organ class and the next year as Professor of Harmony. Between his demanding concert and teaching schedules and his extremely self-critical nature, he composed only about a dozen pieces. A serious automobile accident in 1975 ended his performing career, and Duruflé died in 1986.

Growing up in the Rouen Cathedral choir, Duruflé was immersed in Gregorian chant, and he frequently worked it into his later compositions. Gregorian chant dates back to the 8th century and was used for the liturgical texts in the celebration of the Latin mass and in the divine office, a set of prayers said daily by priests. Chant was monophonic, i.e., having a single vocal line, without harmonization or accompaniment. The underlying text was the most important element in chant and dictated its actual form. Rather than having a fixed metrical pattern to which the text was fit, chant was sung in continuous phrases, with breaks reflecting the natural phrasing of the text. There was generally one note per syllable, with all notes given equal value. Important words or syllables would be emphasized by being stretched over multiple notes. The uneven length of each line of text coupled to the regular pronunciation of Latin words, with the accent on the penultimate syllable, produced the characteristic irregular cadence of chant.

Duruflé composed his *Requiem*, Op. 9 in 1947, providing both an orchestral and organ version. This latter was twice performed here at First Baptist Church under the composer's baton and with his wife as organ soloist. He rescored the work for small orchestra in 1961, the version performed this evening. Concerning the *Requiem*, Duruflé wrote,

"This Requiem is entirely composed on the Gregorian themes of the Mass for the Dead. Sometimes the musical text was completely respected, the orchestral part intervening only to support or comment on it; sometimes I was simply inspired by it or left it completely, for example in certain developments suggested by the Latin text, notably in the *Domine Jesu Christe*, the *Sanctus* and the *Libera*. In general, I have sought above all to enter into the characteristic style of the Gregorian themes. Therefore, I have done my best to reconcile, as far as possible, Gregorian rhythm as it has been established by the Benedictines of Solesmes with the demands of modern meter.

"As for the musical form of each of these pieces, it is generally inspired by the same form presented in the liturgy. The organ's role is merely episodic: it intervenes, not to support the chorus, but solely to underline certain accents or to replace temporarily the sonorities of the orchestra which sound all too human. It represents the idea of peace, of faith and hope."

Durufié uses a number of techniques in setting the Gregorian chant. He often begins a vocal line on an off beat or with a syncopation, and he continually changes the meter from measure to measure, all of which diffuses the 'strong beat-weak beat' feeling of strict metrical music. Some chant melodies are harmonized; others are presented as canons, and some are given countermelodies.

The *Introit* opens with a murmuring in the strings like flowing water, giving the feeling that the listener has come upon a work already in progress. The chant is initially presented by the men's voices with the women offering a wordless countermelody. The *Introit* flows seamlessly into the *Kyrie*, where the chant is presented as a canon, joined by the trumpet playing a beautiful chorale-like melody. Perhaps the most characteristic feature of the traditional Requiem is the setting of the *Dies irae* (days of wrath) text, depicting the cataclysmic Day of Judgment at the end of the world. Many composers have taken advantage of the dramatic possibilities of this text; just consider the Requiems of Mozart or Verdi. By contrast, Durufié is quite restrained in his setting of this text. He omits the bulk of the text, setting only a few verses in which deliverance is sought. This is the most graphic music of the *Requiem*, with the wide chords of the text "deliver us from the lion's mouth" and the dissonant phrase "cast us not into darkness." The mood calms as the text changes to one of more reassurance, entreating God to remember his promise of deliverance made to Abraham and his descendants, ending with a beautiful duet in the women's voices.

The *Sanctus* opens quietly but continuously builds in intensity. The hosannas have an unusual, Middle Eastern flavor, with the syncopated vocal line contrasting with the march-like beat of the tympani. The *Benedictus* is undoubtedly the most concise setting of this text, appended as a single line to the end of the *Sanctus*. The *Pie Jesu* may be the emotional high point of the *Requiem*. Set for mezzo-soprano, it demonstrates the wonderful possibilities for harmonization that Gregorian melody can provide.

The *Agnus Dei* opens with the chant in the vocal line and a lush countermelody in the orchestra. It ends with an incredibly beautiful harmonization of the final phrase "grant them rest." The *Lux aeterna* opens with a statement of the chant melody by the bassoon, which is then picked up by the soprano line, with the other voices providing a wordless accompaniment as in the opening *Introit*. The movement ends with unison voices set over moving, lullaby-like block chords in the orchestra. The *Libera me* is traditionally sung after the mass as the casket is sprinkled with holy water before being taken out of the church. It returns to the *Dies irae* text briefly, but the overall mood is one of supplication. Like Fauré, Durufié divides this text between baritone solo and chorus. The *Requiem* ends with *In Paradisum*, traditionally sung at graveside. It opens quietly with an angelic chorus of sopranos, moving to a divisi chorus of slightly dissonant chords, ending quietly on the text "may they have eternal rest."

Durufié: *Quatre Motets sur des Thèmes Gregoriens* (opus 10)

The *Quatre Motets*, Op. 10, for unaccompanied choir were composed in 1960. They are again based on Gregorian themes, and Duruflé adapts them in ways similar to those he used in the *Requiem*. In the first motet, *Ubi caritas*, he harmonizes the chant theme first presented by the altos. In the second and fourth motets, he provides countermelodies, while in the third, *Tu es Petrus*, he treats the theme in an imitative fashion, distributing it among the four voices.

Poulenc: *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) was born into a wealthy family of pharmaceutical manufacturers (their firm still exists as Rhône-Poulenc). Unlike the other composers in this concert, Poulenc had little formal training in music. He attracted great attention in 1917 with his first composition, *Rhapsodie nègre*, a novelty piece which he dedicated to Eric Satie. His association with Satie, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger and Georges Auric earned him a place in Les Six, a group of young composers influenced by the irreverent Satie and the absurdist writer Jean Cocteau. During this period he wrote a great deal of theatrical and film music, often in collaboration with Cocteau. It was after the death of a close friend in an automobile accident in 1936 and a subsequent retreat at the Church of Our Lady of Rocamadour that Poulenc returned to his Catholic faith. The *Litanies à la Vierge Noire*, written only a week after his visit to Rocamadour, began the steady stream of sacred choral works which forms a great part of his output. In the *Litanies*, Poulenc contrasts the lyrical three-part women's chorus with the more aggressive, dissonant interpolations by the organ.

A student of Dupré, Jeanne Demessieux (1921-1968) was an organist of extraordinary technique as well as a composer. The *Te Deum* is based on Gregorian themes and was inspired by the organ of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Her compositions, unfortunately, are infrequently performed due to their technical demands.

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