**Gabriel Urbain Fauré** (1845-1924) was a pivotal figure in French music who helped to move composition from post Beethoven romanticism into the modern age. Trained as a young boy at the famous École Niedermeyer to be an organist and choirmaster, he gained not only complete mastery of counterpoint and classical forms, but also of the ancient church modes. It was through his facile, and even virtuoso, manipulation of these musical basics that he was able write highly chromatic 20th century music that remained elegantly grounded in a deeply traditional, universally expressive language.

Fauré created a subtle world of color and nuance which his chamber works in particular (songs, sonatas, quartets, quintets) naturally inhabit. He himself was most at home performing in the salons of Paris, preferring that intimacy to the concert stage, or to the Sunday services, weddings, funerals, and choir rehearsals that made up his day job for many years at the Madeleine, the trendy church attended by the Paris upper crust. During these early years the chamber music that he wrote for himself to play with friends was born out of and intended for those salons.

The A major Sonata, is dedicated to the violinist Paul Viardot. As a young man Fauré was a regular guest at the Viardot home. He played chamber music regularly with members of the family (mostly talented amateurs), and for a time was even engaged to Paul’s sister, Marianne. The Viardots supported Fauré in Paris society and introduced him to many other important figures, including Mme. Singer, of sewing machine fame (an avid supporter). Fauré’s music from this period, before the devastating breakup with Mlle. Viardot, is infused with all the brilliance, warm heartedness and charm that defined his after hours, bubbly, bourgeois existence (far from the pressures of the concert stage, and the drudgery of the organ loft) in which his somewhat fragile ego found support and encouragement.

Fauré also received encouragement from his teacher and life-long friend, Camille Saint-Saëns. It was Saint-Saëns, together with the industrialist Camille Clerc, who helped broker Fauré’s first real contract with a publisher, Breitkopf und Härtel. The piece was Fauré’s Sonata Op. 13. The publisher only would risk printing the work of this unknown upstart if the composer relinquished all rights to the music. So, no royalties, but the name Gabriel Fauré would be introduced across Europe. Opus 13 did meet with great success, impressing César Franck, who would compose his own sonata for violin and piano (also four movements, in A major) eleven years later, and led to interest from other publishers including Hamelle, Leduc, and Durand. The Sonata’s fame spurred Fauré to write his Berceuse Op. 16 and the Romance Op. 28, in large part to fill out the popular touring program of opus 13 with the C minor piano quartet, with Fauré at the piano joined by various local artists. Both of these shorter works were orchestrated and were picked up by violin virtuosi of the day including Eugene Ysaÿe, and Jaques Thibaud.

Success resulted in travel and exposure to musicians outside France. Fauré heard Wagner’s operas, and met Liszt. He respected these formidable artists but never fell under the Wagner spell, as Franck and Debussy had done. In fact, he found the “…Teutonic bombast…(of the Ring Cycle) to be…somewhat depressing….” (Nectoux). He made a conscious determination to return to those ancient methods and modes for inspiration. In them, he found an inexhaustible source of unusual melodic devices, and vehicles for ever more daring harmonic effects.

His harmonic inventiveness even is evident in the short Morceaux de lecture à vue (sight-reading piece) from 1903. This work was written at the request of Fauré’s friend Eduard Nadaud (Professor of violin at the Paris Conservatoire) for end-of-semester juries in which students would be expected to sight read. The piece is in A, with forays into C sharp minor, major, and enharmonically, D flat major, supplying plenty of pitfalls for the unsuspecting student. The Morceaux and the Andante Op. 75 both were published containing the fingering and bowing suggestions of Nadaud. For today’s violinist, these markings represent a treasure trove of period style and affect, indicating all the portamenti and finger substitutions that were the hallmark of the aforementioned virtuoso violinists of the day. These colorful expressive effects were sanctioned by the composer, and it is easy to hear how the complex nuances of fingering so aptly serve the music.

The Sonata Op. 108 in e minor is considered by many to be the composer’s greatest work. It is certainly a masterpiece by a mature composer. By the time it is completed in 1917, Fauré has been recognized as a composer of international stature. He has ascended to the directorship of the Paris Conservatoire and his students have include such prodigious personalities as: Florent Schmidt, George Enescu, Maurice Ravel, and Nadia Boulanger (the teacher of Bernstein, Copland, and Piazzola). He not only has survived the Franco-Prussian War (in the infantry), World War I (both his sons fought), and deafness, but, now, even failing eyesight.

This is no longer the music of the salons, but rather music of power, defiance, and even violence. The opening movement introduces jagged rhythms and convulsive leaps that conspire to make discerning the real meter virtually impossible. The centerpiece is the expansive Andante. It is cast in the subdominant, A major, and contains some of the most painfully yearning music ever composed. The interval of the tritone and the constant shifts between major and minor, along with tonally ambiguous whole tone and modal allusions keep this music floating, unresolved. The melodies are stretched almost to the breaking point in length as well as in implication and metaphor.

The Finale, Allegro non troppo (same indication as the first movement), begins with an elegant, nonchalant (*con grazia)* theme that appears to harken back to happier times, but after a mere sixteen measure we are plunged back into harmonic doubt…happiness or sadness, triumph or defeat? The coda gives us some answers as the soaring melodies become entangled by the barbarous material from the first movement, ingeniously superimposed (9/8 and 12/8 over 2/2). In the end it is the violent first movement theme that is transmogrified in the final bars as triumphant E major emerges victorious.

The final farewell on our program is the haunting work entitled simply, *Pièce* from 1920. As if that were not humble enough, *Pièce* is written to be played by “instrument.” It is in the treble clef with piano accompaniment. The Leduc edition suggests “Violon, Flûte, ou Hautbois.” The remarkable two-and-a-half-minute Andante, molto tranquillo begins in A minor with a scale up from A to E, then down from A to E. After eight bars we slip from one key to another until reaching the final untethered whole tone climax, in just twenty-four bars. The A minor theme returns as before, but the C natural from the opening shifts to C sharp four measures from the end, completing this masterful miniature in the major.

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