

From the age of nine Fauré studied music at the *École Niedermeyer*, the '*École de musique religieuse et classique*', where Saint-Saëns was a member of staff. Saint-Saëns was regarded as a progressive teacher, introducing his pupils not only to the music of Bach and Mozart but also to controversial composers such as Wagner and Liszt. Unlike most major French composers, Fauré did not attend the Paris Conservatoire but continued his studies with Saint-Saëns, who greatly encouraged him by putting work his way and helping him to get his music published. The two became lifelong friends and Fauré later said that he owed everything to Saint-Saëns.

Fauré was a fine organist and in 1896 was appointed to the prestigious Madeleine church in Paris. He was also an excellent teacher, and perhaps because of his renowned expertise as organist and teacher only slowly gained recognition as a composer. He eventually became professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire, and its Director from 1905 to 1920. Although he wrote several works involving a full orchestra, his particular talent lay within the more intimate musical forms – songs, piano music and chamber music. His somewhat austere style and highly individual, impressionistic harmonic language contrasts markedly with the music of the Austro-German tradition which dominated European music from the time of Beethoven until well into the twentieth century.

The subtlety of Fauré's music, and his concentration on the small-scale, led many to criticize him for lacking depth, a judgement based on the mistaken premise that the bigger and bolder a composer's music the more worthwhile it must be. Fauré deliberately avoided the grander kind of orchestral music that could easily have brought him fame and fortune. He preferred instead to embrace an elegant and subtle musical language that has won him increasing numbers of admirers, particularly as a composer of songs, a genre in which he is now recognized as a master.

The Requiem was composed in 1888, when Fauré was in his forties, quite probably in response to the recent death of his father. Shortly after its first performance, Fauré's mother also died, giving the work an added poignancy. In 1900, under some pressure from his publishers, he reluctantly agreed to the release of a revised version containing additional instrumental parts designed to broaden the work's appeal. Nowadays it is such a firm favorite that it comes as a surprise to learn that it did not gain widespread popularity until the 1950s.

In its sequence of movements the Requiem departs significantly from the standard liturgical text. Fauré included two new sections, the lyrical *Pie Jesu* and the transcendent *In Paradisum*, with its soaring vocal line and murmuring harp accompaniment. He also omitted the *Dies Irae* and *Tuba Mirum* - for most composers an opportunity to exploit to the full the dramatic possibilities of all the available choral and orchestral forces. Consequently the prevailing mood is one of peacefulness and serenity, and the work has often been described, quite justly, as a Requiem without the Last Judgement.

Of the many settings of the Requiem, this is probably the most widely loved. In comparison with the large-scale masterpieces of Verdi, Brahms and Berlioz, Fauré's setting seems gentle and unassuming, yet it is this very quality of understatement which contributes so eloquently to the work's universal appeal. Whether the Requiem is performed in one of its orchestral versions or simply with organ accompaniment, it is impossible not to be moved by the ethereal beauty of this humble masterpiece.

The version heard this evening is scored for SATB chorus, soprano and baritone soloists, 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, harp, organ and strings.

--Stephen Larmore