

EXPERIENCE  
**Choral Arts**  
THE CHORAL ARTS SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON  
SCOTT TUCKER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Gabriel Fauré: *Requiem*, op. 48  
Florent Schmitt: *Psalm 47*, op. 38  
Lili Boulanger: *Psalm 24*, "La Terre appartient à l'Éternel," LB3G  
Camille Saint-Saëns: *Sarabande*, Op. 93

Sunday, May 19, 2019 | 5:00 pm  
Kennedy Center Concert Hall

Scott Tucker, conductor  
Brandon Straub, conductor  
Laura Choi Stuart, soprano  
Alexandria Shiner, soprano  
Trevor Scheunemann, saritone  
Choral Arts Chorus and Orchestra

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

It is a wonderful thing, after so many decades working as a professional musician, to be astounded by a newly-discovered piece of music as I was when I first stumbled upon *Psalm 47* by Florent Schmitt about a year and a half ago. A little reading showed that Schmitt was a student of Gabriel Fauré's, and this piqued my curiosity: How could a student write in such a wildly different style than his teacher? The answer is as simple as it is satisfying: the best teachers do more than pass on skill and information; they lead their students to their own discoveries and inspire them to uncover their own individual styles. Nadia Boulanger, another of Fauré's students, was perhaps the greatest music teacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even a partial list of her students (Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Virgil Thomson, Darius Milhaud, Elliot Carter, Astor Piazzolla, Philip Glass) not only reads like a who's who of great composers, but also reveals an astounding variety of stylistic approaches. Today's program, then, is not about Schmitt. It is not even really about Fauré, although his iconic *Requiem* lies at the heart of the concert. It is about the importance of great teaching and the value of a good mentor.

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924), was born into a cultured family in the south of France and showed talent at an early age when he discovered a harmonium in a local chapel and played it for hours a day. He was sent to the Niedermeyer School in Paris at the age of nine, a place where musicians were trained in church music and were steeped in the motets and masses of early Renaissance masters such as Palestrina and Victoria. Niedermeyer died in 1861, when Fauré was 16, and the 25-year-old Camille Saint-Saëns took his place. Up until that point, Niedermeyer had sheltered the students from the influences of modern composers such as Schumann, Liszt, and Wagner, but Saint-Saëns enthusiastically shared these latest musical

trends with his students. This opened a new world for the young Fauré, and he was forever grateful to his mentor. Saint-Saëns, for his part, recognized the seeds of talent in his young student and remained Fauré's champion at school and all throughout his long career.

The first feedback that Fauré received concerning his Requiem came from a priest at the Madeleine in Paris where Fauré worked as chorus master. The Requiem was performed in its early version (without the "Hostias" or "Libera me") at a prominent funeral service. After the service, the priest asked Fauré what that music had been. When Fauré replied that it was a requiem he had just composed, the priest replied: "Monsieur Fauré, we don't need all these novelties; the Madeleine's repertoire is quite rich enough."

This workplace indignity notwithstanding, Fauré continued to revise what would eventually become his best known and most beloved work, leading to an additional performance with added brass four months later. Then, in January, 1893, he presented the completed version with what is now known as the "original" orchestration. A version for full orchestra was done at the behest of his publisher in 1900 and performed at the World's Fair in Paris. It is this larger orchestration that we are using this afternoon.

While the Requiem is not the "novelty" described by the priest, it is novel in its choice of text, both for what it includes (the "Pie Jesu" and the "In Paradisum") and especially for what it excludes, namely the "Dies Irae"—a long liturgical poem about the day of judgement which previous composers, such as Berlioz and Verdi, featured as a centerpiece of their treatments of the requiem. Fauré particularly loathed the Berlioz Requiem with its four brass choirs and rows of percussion blaring God's judgement, saying it was a work "in which a taste for large-scale dramatic effects and an indifference towards religious music...may find equal satisfaction."

When I say that Fauré did not set the "Dies Irae," I mean apart from its final couplet; "Pie Jesu Domine, Dona eis requiem" ("Merciful Lord Jesus, grant them rest"), which Fauré sets for solo soprano at the very center of the piece, and which belies all of the fiery references to judgement and damnation that the poem is usually associated with. The words "dies irae" also appear in the "Libera me" movement, but it is a brief reference which passes quickly from terror to comfort. "In Paradisum" is an antiphon which was generally intoned as the deceased was escorted from the church to the grave site. The unusual inclusion of this text as well as the "Pie Jesu" give Fauré's version of the Requiem its intimate quality, leading some to describe it as a "lullaby of death."

Fauré's unique and very personal take on the Requiem mass came from his own attitude towards mortality, evident in a letter he wrote to his son towards the end of his life: "That's how I see death; as a joyful deliverance, an aspiration towards a happiness beyond the grave, rather than a painful experience."

Having as powerful a role model as Saint-Saëns no doubt contributed to Fauré's own work later as an influential teacher. After his appointment as professor of composition at the Paris conservatory, Fauré taught many of the composers who would go on to great careers of their own, most notably Maurice Ravel. Fauré is often described as the bridge between French romanticism and impressionism, and his inspirational teaching style is part of what allowed this to happen. As musicologist Henry Prunières said: "Fauré did not give [recipes] for composing according to his style," and as Enescu put it: "On the purely technical side, [Fauré's] teaching was brief. He was not in the strict technical sense of the word a teacher, but from him came an aura: He was inspiring, and this inspiration was contagious. We adored him!"

One of Fauré's star pupils was Florent Schmitt (1870-1958), who won the Prix de Rome in 1900, and began work on his *Psalm 47* in 1904 while in residence in Rome. It was premiered in Paris in 1906 with large orchestral forces and Nadia Boulanger at the organ. Ravel was present at the premiere and sent a note afterwards saying; "My dear Schmitt, your psalm is so profound and so powerful it nearly shattered the concert hall." *Fanfare* magazine made a more recent assessment, calling it "an extravagant outburst of highly perfumed Franco-exoticism at its most virile, heroic and exalted...I can't think of another piece that achieves – or even attempts – quite the impact made by this work."

Schmitt set only the first few verses of Psalm 47, which begins, "O clap your hands all ye people, shout unto God with a voice of triumph." He reorders the verses when the music calls for it and is liberal with word choice, sometimes paraphrasing. The piece is essentially written in an ABA structure with the outer sections characterized by fanfares and a mixed meter setting of "frappez des mains" ("clap your hands"). A dream-like setting of verse 4, ("He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loves") featuring a soprano solo, serves as the B section. The most notable aspects of the work are the large, powerful forces, the inner rhythmic activity, and the forward-looking harmony. The musicologist Martin Cooper puts it this way: "Harmonically, there is a deliberate ruthlessness such as is seldom found in French music, and a savage pleasure in dissonance that was perhaps new and prophetic in French music." This "ruthlessness" is evident from the very opening of the work – *Psalm 47* is in B minor, but it opens with brass fanfares and choral exclamations in C major, a very distant tonal relationship. This chord, known as a 'tritone substitution' might have been used in a decorative way in the romantic period, but it would have been firmly in the context of the home key. Schmitt begins with this distant tonality and keeps the listener completely off balance and disoriented from the outset, only settling to B minor a full 55 measures into the piece – and then only briefly. It is as if he is linking arms with his fellow rebels, Debussy and Stravinsky, and proclaiming the dawn of a new century where old rules of harmony no longer apply.

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918), the younger sister of Nadia, quickly surpassed her gifted sibling in reputation as a composer, becoming the first woman to win the Prix de Rome in 1913, an honor their father had achieved in 1835, and one that Nadia had coveted but never

accomplished. Nadia went on to become an extraordinary conductor and educator, and Lili would no doubt have become an even more towering figure in music history had she not succumbed to a chronic illness and died at the age of 24. Her setting of Psalm 24 was written in 1916 while she was in residence in Rome. Like Schmitt's setting of Psalm 47, which she no doubt knew, since it had been premiered a decade earlier, Boulanger's setting employs brass fanfares to energize and inform the text which states: "The earth is the Lord's and all the fullness thereof...Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of Glory may come in."

The *Sarabande*, written in 1892 by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), is one of two orchestral works belonging to Opus 93 (the other being *Rigaudon*). A *sarabandde* is a dance form in triple meter which originated in Central America in the 16th century, spread to Italy in the 17th century, then to France where it became a popular court dance. In the Baroque era (roughly 1600 to 1750) it became a staple in dance suites alongside other forms such as the *Rigaudon*, the *Gigue*, the *Courante*, and the *Allemande*. Saint-Saëns, who was a prolific composer, turned to the movements of the baroque dance suite several times for inspiration both in his orchestral and his piano music.

Although Saint-Saëns was only ten years Fauré's senior, his style was firmly rooted in French romanticism, whereas Fauré became more harmonically adventurous, and his students pushed the boundaries even further. Today's program is a stunning example of how, in a span of just over 20 years, musical styles can seem centuries apart all because of mentors who inspire individuality. From Saint-Saëns to Fauré to all of the composers who studied with Nadia Boulanger, music keeps changing as the spark of creativity is continually reignited through the art of great teaching.