Introduction

> Il faut un choix. Mais dans le choix des documents, un certain esprit dominera, – et comme il varie, suivant les conditions de l'écrivain, jamais l'histoire ne sera fixée.
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> "C'est triste," pensaient-ils.[1]
> Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*

Aesthetics and evidence

When we think about Fauré, we have to imagine a composer whose experience spanned two centuries and a cavalcade of artistic movements, fashions, and "isms." When Fauré was born in 1845, Cherubini had been dead only three years, and Fauré could have played some of his own earliest works in Rossini's salon. Before Fauré died in 1924, he had attended the première of *Le sacre du printemps*, studied the score of *Pierrot Lunaire* (he didn't care for it), and befriended Arthur Honegger. Varèse, whose diploma from the Conservatoire bears Fauré's signature, had already composed *Offrandes*, *Hyperprism*, and *Octandre*. Through this long, rich period in the history of music, with all its stylistic explosions, Fauré's own work changed, too. Yet there is an uncanny sameness in the way he realized certain personal techniques and modes of expression across six decades of activity. His contemporaries often remarked on his ability to resist powerful influences that drew other composers off a personal path. He participated in new cultural developments, but he was often regarded, like his friend Paul Dukas, as an "independent" artist. His ability to combine sameness and innovation is puzzling. Fauré's reticence, too, has been a stumbling-block for historians. Far from being the sort of artist to issue a manifesto, he reflected privately and commented obliquely in conversations. His music, often abstract, comes down to us as the most abiding statement of his thought and experience as an artist.

In navigating the open sea of Fauré's reticence, this book strikes a compromise by trying to attend to the most sympathetic vibrations between his extant words and his musical legacy. Drawing Fauré's music into my claims and arguments has been a constant concern, but I have sought above all to subject his rare pronouncements on art to close, repeated readings. There is

every reason to take Fauré's critical legacy very seriously, and by putting it in the context of his professional and creative activities we may meet his reserve half way. In this way, it is possible to develop a historical context for Fauré's achievement. I have more particularly aimed to approach Fauré's understanding of his own work and of the art of music.

To speak of Fauré's aesthetics at all may appear implausible since theorizing about art was entirely contrary to his personal inclinations. He was not merely indifferent to the act of theorizing but almost embarrassed by it, especially where his own music was concerned. Unlike Saint-Saëns and Dukas, he left no philosophical essays on the nature of art or the principles of composition. Unlike Debussy and Ravel, he did not spike his critical articles and interviews with sarcastic sallies. Unlike Vincent d'Indy and Théodore Dubois, he wrote no pedagogical or historical volumes. Yet he was a teacher of composition, the director of France's national conservatory of music, an avid reader, a man of great culture. Fauré was, like Chabrier, Chopin, or Schubert, a literate musician who did not write much about music. It is true that he wrote a certain number of reviews for *Le Figaro*, and some of these reviews clearly manifest his opinions of his predecessors and contemporaries. But more often than not, he hid his deepest beliefs between the lines, or even suppressed them altogether in the interests of amiability or because of his sincere modesty before a novel achievement.

Fauré's reluctance to discuss general musical questions or the content of his own works extends even to his private letters. There, in rare moments when he begins to explain his artistic motivations or discuss a feature of his music, he tends to draw back, as if mortified by an indiscretion. For example, after vaguely explaining his compositional goals in "Le don silencieux," op. 92, to his wife, he exclaimed, "Here I am playing the pedant!"[2] Or again, in a friendly letter to Pierre Lalo, he reprimanded himself for mentioning his aims in the musical characterization of Penelope: "What a lot of chit-chat!!!"[3]

A musical historian offering a study of Wagner's aesthetics or Boulez's would cause less surprise than one who writes on Fauré's aesthetics. The abundance of written documents by Wagner or Boulez does not, of course, make those first two tasks particularly easy, but no one can complain of lacking primary material. In the title of this study, I chose to speak not of "Fauré's aesthetics" but more indirectly of "Fauré and French musical aesthetics." By conjunction rather than possession, I mean to acknowledge that Fauré did not leave the kind of detailed documents whose contents would allow for a systematic philosophical evaluation. Can we still assert, then, that Fauré had "an aesthetics"? Yes. For what does it mean to speak of a composer's aesthetics? In general, we mean not only his ideas about music in

general and the music of his contemporaries, but also his ideas about his own music, his own creativity, his particular relation to other artistic visions. The aesthetics of a critic or philosopher will not reach into this second layer of meanings (unless, of course, the critic is a composer too). That is to say, when we speak of a critic's aesthetics, we draw our conclusions from the ideas expressed in his collected writings.[4] When we speak of a composer's aesthetics, we usually include his artistic legacy, and a book that evaluated a composer's letters and criticism but failed to consider his music would, on the whole, be unsatisfying as a study of his aesthetics. The most reliable traces of a composer's aesthetics might, far from any written decrees, lie in his music, or, more likely, in a composite space interpenetrated by notes and words.

Therefore the lack of systematic testimony from Fauré is not to be equated with a lack of aesthetic thought: an artist's creative work testifies to that thinking, too.[5] In a sense, Fauré's music might even be considered sufficient evidence of his aesthetics. However, we need not restrict ourselves to his music alone in recovering the foundations of his thinking. Fauré may have been laconic, but from time to time he could not help discussing his own and others' music. We shall see that on one or two occasions he even asked himself profound questions about his art. Other kinds of evidence may also be brought into play, including the record of his ambitions and activities in the Parisian musical world and his work as a teacher and as director of the Conservatoire. His œuvre, words, and actions all support the possibility of rendering a defensible account of his aesthetic orientation. Once we have come to terms with his ideals and stylistic practice, future researchers will be better able to explain how Fauré's music came to serve as a spiritual and technical model for at least two more generations of composers.

Overview

This book does not provide a biography of Fauré or a survey of his musical production. Jean-Michel Nectoux and Robert Orledge have already established the facts of Fauré's life and works on a solid documentary foundation. Rather, this book builds on that foundation by placing Fauré's musical achievement in the context of a cultural history at once broader and more detailed. Fauré's aesthetic thought is the starting point for each chapter, which then proceeds to larger premises, debates, and ideological warrants. This project is historical: the issues I have tackled are mostly those that concerned French critics and musicians of Fauré's own time, and I have approached them in their historical context. Where it seemed useful, I

stretched the argument forward diachronically, as when writings by Pierre Boulez or Stanley Cavell allow us to reflect on the role of originality and sincerity over the course of the later twentieth century. The themes of the first five chapters, tied together by the concept of artistic vocation, are sincerity, novelty, originality, self-renewal, homogeneity, and religious belief. Sincerity and originality, though familiar ideas, had distinct meanings in Fauré's time which more recent historical developments have altered or obscured, and thus it is particularly important to map out their premises and implications. The recovery of these ideas, as well as some of those examined in the later chapters, often bears not only on Fauré's conception of his creative labors, but also on composers and critics who shared or rejected his views. Finally, each chapter connects abstract aesthetic categories to Fauré's choices in specific works, and thus I try to show how these categories might provide a basis for new analytical insights.

Chapter 1 argues that sincerity played a central role in the creation, criticism, and social production of French music between 1890 and 1930. Despite the centrality of this idea to French philosophy and criticism during the latter half of Fauré's life, the meaning of sincerity for the history of early twentieth-century music has never been studied. It is fair to say that music, of all the arts, dominated speculative aesthetics in France around 1900. In the novels of Proust as in the philosophy of Bergson, music came to embody an exemplary translation of the individual unconscious, and thus sincerity and music tended to merge. The privileged link between music and *la vie intérieure* made it possible for music to lay claim to sincere, transparent self-representation, whereas the same claim gave rise to epistemological conflicts in literature. Sincerity was essential to Fauré's conception of musical expression, and, among his contemporaries, he was consistently identified as "sincere." What did this mean? In Fauré's compositional practice and in his teaching, the idea of sincerity figured as a flexible, constructive response to the fragmentation of musical styles around the turn of the century. Opposed to fashion and yet welcoming stylistic difference, the call to sincerity placed historical and social conditions in a radically personal perspective and thus afforded composers a liberal means of discovering an individual relation to past or present music. This moral idea thus became central to the aesthetics of the era and left salient traces in the artistic practices of Fauré, Debussy, Messager, Dukas, and Kœchlin, as in the work of philosophers and writers such as Bergson, Combarieu, Valéry, and Proust.

Chapter 2 shows that Fauré tended to treat novelty and tradition as complementary rather than oppositional values. As Louis Aguettant once put it, Fauré's music is "a place where opposites are reconciled."[6] Fauré's seemingly paradoxical attitude toward innovation has caused a number of historians

and analysts to lose him on the threshold of the twentieth century. Although the goal of this second chapter is to evaluate Fauré's views of innovation rather than to prove his qualities as an innovator, a number of musical examples there attest, in a very limited way, to an important phase in the development of his style during the last decade of the nineteenth century. The chapter more generally measures Fauré's artistic bearings by examining his relations with other composers, his pedagogical and administrative practices at the Conservatoire, and reactions to his musical innovations on the part of critics.

In studying the role of innovation in Fauré's career, we are forced to confront a distinction between novelty and originality. This difference was crucial to French aesthetics during Fauré's lifetime, but was subsequently lost or abandoned. Chapter 3 analyzes the relationship between originality and novelty. The concept of originality encompassed two levels of meaning. First, there is the material sense of stylistic novelty discussed in chapter 2. Newness in this sense, however, was subordinate to a "novelty of the spirit," which, in contrast to material novelty, is impossible to copy. It was this second meaning that Dukas dubbed a composer's "most original originality." It cannot be copied precisely because it is a manifestation of the unique moral and sensory temperament of the artist who possesses it. Such originality finally connotes nothing less than an artist's irreducible singularity as a human being and is a correlate of sincerity. The first section of chapter 3, centered on a close reading of Dukas's essay "La musique et l'originalité," takes up the definition, history, and cultural motivations of "radical originality." The following sections investigate the implications of this kind of originality for an artist's personal development and public reception. These sections focus on the problems raised by artistic influence and the process of self-renewal, which are closely related to originality. The final part of the chapter moves beyond the historical range of Fauré's lifetime to consider how the meaning of originality so changed in the later twentieth century as to become absorbed into the once subordinate category of novelty. The account of this ideological inversion continues as far forward as the most recent writings of Pierre Boulez, where we reach a point of reversal. Surprisingly, composers now seem to be rehabilitating originality as an important historical and aesthetic category.

Chapter 4 treats a topic that, like sincerity, has received little or no attention in studies of early twentieth-century music: homogeneity. I use this term to designate the consistency of a composer's musical style over time. The chapter unravels the meaning and cultural consequences of homogeneity in France and discusses Fauré's knack for reinventing himself musically within the bounds of almost unvarying technical and expressive propensities. Only

through an understanding of the principles of sincerity and originality, as unfolded in the preceding chapters, can we reconcile Fauré's penchant for innovation with the homogeneity of his style. In the middle part of the chapter, the striking differences between the reception of new works by Fauré and Debussy from about 1900 to 1910 serve to point up some problems latent in the ideal of homogeneity. Insufficient homogeneity carried negative consequences for public reception; the main difficulty seemed to lie in listeners' uncertainty about the meaning of changes in a composer's style.

Proust, who greatly admired Fauré, made homogeneity the pre-eminent trait of his ideal musician, the fictional Vinteuil, and the novelist's detailed speculations on the composer's vocation in *La prisonnière* contribute to our understanding of why this quality was so important to Fauré's contemporaries as a mark of greatness. In the closing section of the chapter, I advance the idea that Proust's meditations on homogeneity may provide a new way of thinking about different forms of recurrence in Fauré's music. Compositions written in different periods of Fauré's life provide examples of these varieties of repetition, from self-quotation to vague reminiscence.

The concepts analyzed in the first four chapters – sincerity, novelty, originality, self-renewal and homogeneity – prove to be intimately bound up with one another; all address the process of self-expression in art. The fifth and sixth chapters consider other issues: the role of religion in Fauré's life and career, and the quality of elusiveness that seems to characterize so much of what Fauré was about as an artist.

The study of religious belief immediately throws the inquiry open to social history, politics, and symbolic representation, and the fifth chapter examines the relationships between Fauré's music and his personal commitments. It also compares his beliefs to the religious movements and controversies of his own lifetime. Fauré always avoided explicit avowals, but I argue that his beliefs and orientation can be outlined if not determined. Those beliefs also changed over time: beginning in a lukewarm Catholicism, he wavered between pantheism and agnosticism in his maturity and finally approached atheism in his last years. Fauré's statements on the nature of sacred music and the authority of the church are relatively abundant and allow us to trace his spiritual evolution indirectly. His music is even more revealing, and the second section of the chapter gives particular attention to his musical and textual choices in the Requiem, op. 48. The remainder of the chapter focuses on *La chanson d'Ève*, op. 95, a cycle of songs with complex spiritual implications. I argue for a pantheistic phase in Fauré's religious development around 1906 by analyzing Fauré's musical setting in detail and comparing it to Charles Van Lerberghe's original poems.

The sixth and final chapter attempts a summary of Fauré's aesthetics

under the signs of evasion and ambiguity. The various elements of Fauré's music seem to work together to create a language of deliberate elusiveness. In the realm of harmony and counterpoint, he replaces strong harmonic progressions by fourth and fifth with weak progressions founded on a linear bass; he prefers tonicization to modulation; and his modal practice often concedes only what is strictly necessary to tonal unity. When these features are combined with a penchant for maintaining one or two figural patterns over a long time, a dignified reluctance to depend on obvious contrast, and a slowly graded dynamism, the musical result is kaleidoscopic, slippery, and wave-like. Copland referred more informally to "a certain ungetatable quality" in Fauré's music, "disconcerting to the uninitiated."[7] The first half of chapter 6 concentrates on one technical area in particular: Fauré's treatment of meter, which has gone relatively unnoticed in the literature. Yet even a rapid glance at some of Fauré's metrical techniques reveals an important aspect of the "ungetatable quality" of his art. In making metrical patterns the servant of the phrase rather than a series of continual downbeats, Fauré tends to confound regular metrical divisions and to deny accents except at selected points of harmonic reinforcement. The multivalence in Fauré's music sometimes makes two or three distinct metrical interpretations of the same phrase possible, but the composer characteristically disguises this complexity behind a bland façade of regular barlines. Notation does not contravene aural experience, however. The composer's harmonic, melodic, and metrical techniques work together to create passages of floating multivalence that throw the listener into a very Fauréan state of uncertainty.

The remainder of the chapter considers the theme of elusiveness in light of Fauré's character as a man and an artist. In this broader sense, Fauré's elusiveness extends to his attitude toward the poietic dimension of his work (its origins, conception, and craftsmanship); his distrust of titles and avoidance of extramusical referents in his instrumental music; and his tendency to erase or blur specific details drawn from the real world.

Unresolved: the case of Fauré

The greatness of Fauré's music is not at issue. What remains to be fathomed is the nature of his artistic adventure in a particular place at a particular time. Fauré's musical achievement embodies the interregnum in which he lived, and even people who like historical labels grope aimlessly when asked whether Fauré's music is late romantic, post-romantic, or modern. These categories are not interesting, but the specific nature of Fauré's achievement is. He created something new by driving traditional means to peculiar and untraditional ends. Consequently, his music appears too reckless for a

traditionalist and not reckless enough for a revolutionary. Outside of France, Fauré figures inadequately in histories and analyses of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century music. British scholars have done him more justice than Americans, but his music too easily slips between the chronological volumes of our histories. A pair of volumes published by Schirmer Books in 1990, *Nineteenth-Century Piano Music* and *Twentieth-Century Piano Music*, offers a rather literal example of this failure: Fauré figures in neither of these books despite the fact that he should be in both.[8] Even the collective nature of their authorship does not excuse the double oversight. To omit Fauré's piano music is to omit that of one of the most important composers to sustain and transform the legacy of Chopin and, in some respects, of Liszt, Schumann, and Mendelssohn, into the twentieth century. In this sense, one could contend that Fauré and Skryabin occupy similar historical positions.

As I look back on the various stages of this study, it seems to me that making a case for Fauré's historical importance must have been one of the latent motivations behind my research. In a private letter, Leonard B. Meyer once drew my attention to an interesting distinction that bears on this motivation. Meyer distinguishes between musical importance (for example, Mozart or Fauré) and historical importance (Weber, Webern). The distinction is not meant to pigeonhole but to provide a historiographic starting point. Fauré's musical importance is more obvious than his historical importance, but his historical importance has been given so little attention that it is difficult to judge what it might be. This book does not make an explicit case for this latter kind of importance, but many of the ideas advanced in the following pages substantiate Fauré's historical importance and his influence on other musicians. This preliminary work only offers a point of departure for a more detailed examination of Fauré's place in twentieth-century music. The power of Fauré's style remains, to some extent, a source of unrealized potential. In 1995, Robin Holloway asked whether "somewhere, somehow, there lies within [Fauré's style] an elixir for the future."[9] The question is particularly pertinent when we seem to be looking toward an eclectic, post-tonal future, not a strictly atonal one. Looking backward, too, Holloway observes, "Fauré stands to Stravinsky . . . rather as Mahler to Schoenberg." This comparison is interesting precisely because it suggests the possibility that Fauré might be "as important historically as he is intrinsically."[10] Holloway challenges other listeners to hear Fauré's technique and spirit, as he does, in *Orpheus*, *The Rake's Progress*, and even sections of *Agon*.[11] There is good reason to pursue such unexpected likenesses, which may have a common basis in the free modal interchange that characterizes Fauré's music.

Fame came late to Fauré. Although a certain amount of interest in his work started to grow among amateurs and critics after 1887, the great turning point came in 1905, the last phase of his career. "It could be said that Fauré's great fame dates only from the moment when he was named director of the Conservatoire [i.e., 1905]," wrote André Messager. "This office naturally brings with it a certain amount of publicity for the works of the person who holds it, and thus his songs, piano pieces, and chamber music were rapidly disseminated."[12] Yet Fauré's ascent to a high position in the French musical world was no guarantee of artistic understanding, and misunderstanding continued into his very last years. Haloes of distinction descended on him, but his real importance as a composer, as opposed to a figurehead, was long an enigma to all but a select circle. Champions of Fauré's art, few in number, were not far off the mark when they sometimes called themselves "initiates." Beyond French borders, the Fauréan cult was even smaller. In 1961, Louis Aubert, once a pupil of Fauré's, approached this problem from the angle of musical style: "It's the perfection of his style that makes Fauré hermetic. He seldom allows the listener to take a breath. He offers him no concessions. There are none of those landings that would ordinarily dispel fatigue and allow the listener to relax . . . Everything in his music is elaborated in terms of beauty and beauty alone."[13] Earlier in the century, René Dumesnil considered the relative neglect of Fauré's music from a historical viewpoint:

> Two things undermined him, and greatly: first, his modesty, or rather the disdain in which he held glory during a period when it was easier than ever for mediocrity to raise a ruckus; second – and this was a consequence of that attitude – his reluctance to supplant his first successes as a composer of songs with the more substantial, large-scale works he composed later. For people who knew only his point of departure as a composer, he remained a "charming" musician, the composer of "La chanson du pêcheur," "Lydia," "Après un rêve."[14]

Dumesnil did not hesitate to add that these songs "deserved their renown" but claimed that they mattered less in the history of French music than *La chanson d'Ève* and *L'horizon chimérique*, than *Prométhée* and *Pénélope*, than the treasury of the late chamber music. He was on the mark in alluding to Fauré's often passive approach to his own reputation as one cause of indifference to his later works. As a pianist, at home and abroad, Fauré was docile in catering to the tastes of his singers and audiences, who almost always called for "the good old things."[15] It is characteristic, too, that he continued to arrange and participate in performances of his first and second piano quartets (dating from 1880 and 1887) even during the Great War,

while leaving his later chamber music, including the masterpieces he composed in that very period, almost to providence. Certainly, Fauré's increasing deafness would explain this reluctance to perform new music. But his physical impairment cannot be cited as the only explanation, for on the one hand he occasionally participated in performances of his new works as late as 1919, and on the other hand, he admitted before he lost his hearing that he preferred to perform the first of his two piano quartets because "it is the one I play least badly."[16] It is probably significant that Saint-Saëns once remarked, "*When he wants to be*, Gabriel Fauré is an organist and a pianist of the first water."[17] Fauré could have been a stronger proponent of his own later music, whose value he knew. But his temperament restrained him from self-promotion.

Fauré, then, may be partly to blame for the impairment of his own reputation. But surely enough time has passed to extricate his legacy from the influence of his own modesty or lack of enterprise. In the past ten years, a high tide of new recordings has come in from all over Europe and North America. The increasing international interest on the part of interpreters bodes well for a matching response from scholars and amateurs.

Afterthought

In working out the themes of this study, a small amount of repetition across the chapters was difficult to avoid. This repetition is warranted, since it is the consequence of an attempt to ground the consistent and interrelated elements of Fauré's thought. I deliberately subject certain phrases or sentences of Fauré's to repeated examination. I have chosen to return to some passages in new contexts in order to bring out different implications. While aiming for breadth of historical span and depth in analyzing aesthetic categories, the conditional nature of most conclusions in a study such as this brings me back to my epigraph, provided by Flaubert's disheartened copy-clerks: "In the choice of documents, a certain frame of mind will prevail, and as it varies according to the writer's circumstances, history will never be fixed." This is the more true for the fact that Fauré lived through the era historians have christened the "golden age" of the press in France. The printed record of musical activity in his lifetime is vast, and no one can hope to exhaust it. Other scholars will thus bring new details to bear on Fauré's aesthetic orientation or will reinterpret the documents I have already marshaled. "How sad," Bouvard and Pécuchet remarked in the face of this perpetual instability and revision. But no: there is no sadness, only lucid pleasure in reimagining one of the richest eras in the whole history of music.