

## **Gabriel Fauré: *Piano Trio in D minor, Op. 120***

In the early 20th century Debussy, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg revolutionized the foundation of Western music in the areas of tonality, harmony, and symmetric meter. At the same time, Gabriel Fauré was working with this foundation, not by abandoning the traditional structures, but by “blurring” them – especially in his later works. (Christopher Steele, “Tonal and Formal Blurring in Fauré’s Piano Trio Op. 120”.) “Blurring” of tradition is an excellent description for Fauré, but impossible to address in a program note. However, a selective sketch of his life might provide a hint.

As a composer, from an early age, Fauré developed independently of the establishment. Rather than the Paris Conservatoire, a gateway for any French musician, he attended the École Niedermeyer in Paris. His early influences came from Gounod, Massenet, Chopin and Schumann, but the École added influences from Gregorian chant, Renaissance polyphony, and modality. This mix – and his imagination – resulted in works that eventually set him at odds with the conservative Conservatoire. In 1892, when he was considered for a post as composition professor at the Conservatoire, his nomination was rejected by the head on the grounds that his music was too “modern.” Four years later, after the head of the Conservatoire died, Fauré was finally appointed professor of composition. Among his pupils were Maurice Ravel (also represented on this program) and Nadia Boulanger. Then in 1905 Fauré became head of the Conservatoire. Beginning in 1911 he began to lose his hearing, and in 1920 he retired as head of the Conservatoire. His health continued to deteriorate, and in 1924 he died of pneumonia at age 79.

Originally conceived for clarinet, cello and piano, the 1922 Piano Trio is Fauré’s penultimate work (the string quartet is the last). The first performance was by Jacques Thibaud, Pablo Casals, and Alfred Cortot. After the premiere a friend reportedly said, “If he lives a hundred years, how far will he go?” Even with loss of hearing and failing health, Fauré was building and extending his own compositional technique and continuing to “blur” traditional structures.

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## **Colin Jacobsen: *BTT for String Quartet***

BTT started off in my mind as an investigation into and celebration of the incredible creative ferment and experimentation of the 1970’s/80’s downtown New York scene as embodied by the likes of Glenn Branca, Meredith Monk, Arthur Russell, John Zorn, the Velvet Underground, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, the New

York Dolls, Laurie Anderson, Mother Mallard’s Portable Masterpiece Company, the Lounge Lizards, to name a few. However, I also found myself thinking about John Cage and Johann Sebastian Bach. This happened in part because a colleague of mine suggested that Cage was really the spiritual father of that whole scene, and I had this thought that he was tapping into the same elemental stuff that Bach did, though coming at it perhaps from an opposite point of view and obviously from a very different era. While Cage is known as a proponent of chaos, one realizes that for every musical experiment he made, he set up a system of rules and then looked forward to what unfolded within that system (though often in extreme and unexpected juxtaposition). When we

think of Bach and the cosmic order in his fugues, there's a similar setting up of parameters that almost has a pre-determined quality, but then there's that same sense of things unfolding in a natural and larger than human way.

I also felt that even within the incredible eclecticism that defined that downtown NY scene (which continues to influence so many musical worlds- contemporary classical, folk, rock and jazz included) one could think of the "minimalism" (music that unfolds over spacious time) of Glass and Reich as one thread and the "maximalism" (music that constantly seeks to smash and subvert itself even as it's happening) of Zorn as another. And I found it interesting to have those two streams juxtaposed at times in this piece.

All this to say that most of the musical material in BTT emanates from a spelling of B-A-C-H and C-A-G-E (D), which in and of itself sets up an interesting juxtaposition of tonalities. The BACH motif is chromatic and curls in on itself while the CAGE motif has an open and pentatonic feel. Over the course of the piece, the two motifs interact in a variety of ways, sometimes contradicting each other and sometimes in harmony.

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## **Maurice Ravel: *Piano Trio in A minor***

What does it mean for a composer to write 'for an instrument'? To begin with, there are physical parameters. An instrument can play so high or so low; it can play so loud or so soft; and it can do so within a certain timbral range that identifies the sound and materials of the instrument. There are cultural parameters, too, of course: some instruments suggest a particular locale or style; some instruments suggest a public or ceremonial purpose (post-horn); and some instruments have a tradition of bringing particular affective capacities. There are a lot of variables, and a lot of choices to be made. More often than not, the choices of instrumentation are made by default or practical necessity: you write for the band you have, and you write for it in ways that its players can productively interpret.

By the time Maurice Ravel was writing a piano trio in 1914, conventions of instrumentation were being rather heavily altered by methods and modes of Modernism. In some important ways, Modernism brought a reconfiguration of what was foreground and what was background. Special effects which may have formerly belonged to the temporary expansion or virtuosic celebration of an instrument became more essential elements of compositions, reflecting the nature of the instrument itself as much as its tradition. For Maurice Ravel, this presented opportunities for great compositional virtuosity — an opportunity to explore limits of instrumental possibility.

There are too many examples of Ravel's spectacular capacity to write to the physical limits of instruments - harmonics, pizzicati, tricks of voicing and register. These will speak brightly for themselves. It is perhaps more useful to point out the earthy and mechanical foundations over which the instruments can explode. The first movement is loosely based on Basque folk-song, and a contest of two rhythms which add up to eight: (2+3+2) v. (2 + 2 +2 + 2). The second movement, while it has a fairly conventional A-B-A scheme like many a scherzo movement, also overlays a Malaysian poetic scheme called 'Pantoum', which alternates rhymes (or in this case

musical phrases) ABAB-BCBC-CD CD, etc. The slow movement is a passacaglia — a simple form over a repeating bass line — employing subtle rhythmic surprises. The last movement brings out the instrumental fireworks in full, over what is essentially a series of crescendi, ending where they finally ought to end.

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