Gabriel Fauré: Music for piano
Christine Croshaw
In his beautiful music, Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) created a world of infinite possibilities and uncertainties. As it is with the music, so it was with the man. He wrote to his wife: “You are categorical. I am not. I shall die as I have lived, with my mind in a state of flux.” Perhaps that is why, in a world in which every box has to be ticked, everything fixed and predictable, the music of Fauré remains elusive, neglected, and difficult to understand. His biographer, Norman Suckling spoke of the music’s: “chaste voluptuousness” and “disturbed serenity.” Fauré is indeed paradoxical. On the one hand, you have what appears to be dazzling brilliance and shimmering colours, with voluptuous and often surprisingly unexpected harmonies, and, on the other hand, there is always a clear and lucid logic that informs the music with a firm will, served by the most precise skills and technical assurance of the highest order. The music shows a perfect balance of passion and intellect, the most elegant fusion of instinct and rationality. In the words of one contemporary writer: “If you cannot feel the physical voluptuousness of certain modulations, if you cannot taste the pungency of certain chords, you will understand nothing of Fauré’s disconcerting style, and its apparent simplicity.”

Fauré was a man of exquisite taste, who moved with elegance and natural ease. Saint-Saëns described him as being cat-like in his movements, and possessing the feline qualities of charm and delicacy. His music, too, shows a sinuous quality, requiring considerable suppleness and flexibility on the part of the performer. It slides imperceptibly from note to note, from key to key, creating a magical range of colours and shadings of great subtlety and refinement. It is here, as one sound slips into another, that Fauré's music reveals itself. Here we find the nuances of which the composer never tired of speaking. “Nuance is the thing,” he would repeat, over and over again. Fauré's music is always sensual and seductive, with its rich harmonies, and long singing melodic lines, but it evokes no story, no picture. He creates sound-images directly, without any programme or idea driving the natural, spontaneous musical impulse. When his “Pièces brèves” were published in 1902, he wrote: “I assure you it was impossible to give these pieces individual titles, and I am convinced that, in the present musical climate, it is no longer necessary. The title “Pièce” is perfectly accepted, and a number is all that is required to identify it.” Fauré is, indeed, pure music.

Fauré's genius found full expression in the enchanted world of the Barcarolle. The warmth and languor of the southern seas, the fluidity and sparkle of the gently moving waters were perfectly realised in the subtle colours and nuances of Fauré's music. His thirteen Barcarolles, like the thirteen Nocturnes, spanned almost the whole of Fauré's creative life, and was the largest number written by any composer in this genre.

Barcarolle No. 1, published in 1881, has a haunting quality, with its gently rising and falling scales, over an undulating and lilting rhythm, contrasting with a turbulent middle section. The work was premièred in 1881 by the composer's mentor and friend, Saint-Saëns. And it was to Saint-Saëns that Fauré dedicated his first large-scale-work, the Ballade, Opus 19. Written in 1879, this work is unquestionably the masterpiece of the composer's early creative period. It was followed by a version for piano and orchestra in 1881. The Ballade had its origins in three separate pieces, which were linked and developed into one work, originally entitled “Fantasie.” Here everything is pure music. The piece overflows with exuberance of spirit, capriciousness, luminosity and the most unexpected and seductive harmonies. The transparent and vivid polyphonic writing pays tribute to the influence of Chopin. A lyrical nocturne-like introduction is followed by three movements linked by two short Andante sections, the whole work showing great rhythmic and thematic unity. On
complection, Fauré took it to Franz Liszt. He later told the pianist, Marguerite Long: “I was rather afraid it might be too long, and I said this to Liszt, who gave me the marvellous reply: 'Too long, young man, has no meaning. One writes as one feels.'” This great work should surely have destroyed for ever the composer's reputation as a “salon composer”, but this was an image which was to haunt him throughout his life, long after his early songs and charming piano pieces, written for young society ladies, had been left far behind. **Romance sans paroles No. 3** is a beguiling example of this youthful style, and shows the young composer's homage to Mendelssohn. (The Three Romances sans paroles were Fauré's first published works, and date from 1863). No 3 was recorded by the composer himself around 1908, on a piano roll, revealing not only his clarity and directness in performance, but a penchant for adding bass octaves, which the present performer has taken the liberty of including.

From 1879 to the end of Fauré's first creative period in 1886, piano music dominated his writing. The works of this time show the considerable influence of Chopin, from whom he adopted the forms not only of the Ballade and Barcarolle, but also writing Impromptus, a Mazurka, and Nocturnes. The 13 Nocturnes were written between 1875 and 1921. In these works of great poetic beauty, Fauré uses the most subtle of shadings to evoke a world on the edge of reality. **Nocturne No. 4 in E flat major**, composed in 1884, opens with a long, limpid, bell-like theme in falling fourths. A repeat of this, elaborated with left-hand arpeggios, leads into a section in which a gentle trembling of the left-hand semiquaver accompaniment creates the feeling of awakening from a dream, with the bells chiming in the distance. There is an atmosphere of great tranquility, from which the music slowly emerges, gradually moving towards a passionate climax. With the return of the opening theme, we begin to drift back into the calm stillness of the dream-world. The four Valses-Caprices show a debt to both Chopin and Saint-Saëns, but by adding the word “Caprice”, Fauré develops and transforms the genre. **Valse-Caprice No. 2 in A flat major** was composed between 1882 and 1884. It is a brilliant and capricious piece of exhilarating virtuosity, revealing a wonderful fusion of musical feeling and movement. The gaiety of the dance contrasts dramatically with a sombre and haunting C sharp minor section, with the added sonority of bell-like chimes, which soon gives way to the return of the major key, and the joyous excitement of the dance. **Barcarolle No. 3 in G flat major** (1885) opens with a gentle and melancholy melody, which floats as if adrift on a sea of uncertain tonalities. The wonderfully decorative figures of the following section create the feeling of the sea-foam breaking on the crests of the waves. This is a work of great subtlety and poetic feeling, which again recalls the influence of Chopin.

**Pièces brèves**, a collection of eight pieces written over a span of 40 years, were published in 1902, and show a remarkable diversity of style. No. 4, composed in 1902, is a melancholy and sombre piece, which anticipates the dark intensity of later compositions. No. 5 is graceful and lyrical in style, and was composed as a sight-reading piece for the Paris Conservatoire exams in July, 1901. A number of the Pièces brèves were composed originally for this purpose. **Nocturne No. 6**, composed in 1894, is one of Fauré's greatest masterpieces, in which the long opening phrase creates an atmosphere of timeless serenity. The renowned French pianist, Alfred Cortot, described the work as follows: “The emotion in this Nocturne goes far beyond personal sentiments to arrive at a universality which is the mark of a masterpiece.” The Nocturne ends with the music slipping magically from key to key, creating a most wonderful kaleidoscope of colours, surely fulfilling the composer's intentions, as expressed in his own words: “I always enjoy seeing light play on the rocks,
the water, the trees, the meadows. What variety of effects, what brilliance, what softness....I wish my music could show as much diversity.”

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“My first acquaintance with the music of Gabriel Fauré came when I was introduced to his songs by the eminent singing teacher, Flora Nielsen, with whom I enjoyed the privilege of working during my student days at the Royal Academy of Music. I vividly remember playing for the first time Fauré's most well-loved Mélodie, “Après un Reve”. It was a revelation! How could such deep emotion be expressed with such apparent simplicity, and in so short a space of time? I later came to perform it in the arrangement for cello and piano, which I found equally beautiful. Many years were to elapse before I made the joyful discovery of Percy Grainger's delightful transcription for solo piano”.

Described in Gramophone magazine (January 2012) as “a first-rate artist”, Christine Croshaw is acknowledged as being among the most distinguished British pianists of her generation. Her recordings for Meridian Records of solo and chamber music of the early 19th century are frequently heard on Radio 3 and Classic FM, and have received wide critical acclaim. Christine's most recent release, of music by Saint-Saëns, received equally enthusiastic reviews: “Her musical, revelatory pianism seems almost outside of time in its understated eloquence.” (Musicweb International, January 2012.) Recordings have also included four recently reissued albums for the American label Golden Crest, with flautist Mark Thomas. Christine has enjoyed a busy concert career, with engagements taking her to most of the major venues in the UK, including many appearances at the Wigmore Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Kings Place, and extensively across the Continent. Her many festival appearances include Cheltenham, Lichfield, Kensington and Chelsea, Ludlow, Lisbon, Bermuda and Taormina. As well as appearing as a soloist, Christine has performed with many leading international artists including the legendary violinist, Nathan Milstein, French horn player, Alan Civil and flautists, Jaques Zoon, Robert Winn and Peter-Lukas-Graf. Ensembles she has appeared with include the Verdehr Trio, the Hanson Quartet, The Pro Arte Piano Quartet and the Nash Ensemble. At sixteen, Christine won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, where she studied with Flora Nielsen, with whom I enjoyed the privilege of working during my student days at the Royal Academy of Music. I vividly remember playing for the first time Fauré's most well-loved Mélodie, “Après un Reve”. It was a revelation! How could such deep emotion be expressed with such apparent simplicity, and in so short a space of time? I later came to perform it in the arrangement for cello and piano, which I found equally beautiful. Many years were to elapse before I made the joyful discovery of Percy Grainger's delightful transcription for solo piano”.

www.christinecroshaw.com
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[3] Romance sans paroles No.3 in A flat major 2:30
[7] Pièces brèves Op.84, No.4 3:30
[8] Pièces brèves Op.84, No.5 2:00
[10] Après un rêve (transcribed by Percy Grainger) 2:50

Christine Croshaw - piano

Piano by Fazioli, courtesy of Jaques Samuel Pianos, London.

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