

In Paradisum

The Unique Spirituality of
Fauré's Requiem

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By most accounts, Gabriel Fauré was not a religious man. In 1870, he was expelled from his position as organist at Saint-Sauveur in Rennes on account of rising tension with the parish, who would often call him out for his irreverent behavior during services.¹ Though the composer did not leave behind much discourse that would allow us to put a label on his faith (or the lack thereof), his letters and interviews suggest that he had more than a few issues with the Church and religious doctrines of his time. It seems peculiar, then, that Fauré should ever have written one of his most enduring and popular compositions: his *Requiem* (1890), a highly liturgical work composed entirely out of his own volition.

To some scholars, the idea of a requiem seemed so irreconcilable with what was known about Fauré's character that defining his motives became a study of its own. Some have suggested that the *Requiem* was written in response to the deaths of his parents (two years apart). Fauré himself gave not much reason other than that he desired to write a "different" kind of requiem—perhaps out of a certain ennui for liturgy after spending most of his professional life in the service of various parishes, but perhaps in a much deeper sense as well. In the following pages, I intend to illustrate how the latter may be true—how Fauré's *Requiem*, through changes to the standard mass set and subtle musical effects, not only makes for a unique setting of the requiem mass, but represents a yearning, in both Fauré and his contemporaries, for a new kind of spirituality divorced from ideas of divine wrath, judgement, and damnation.

Like most liturgical music, the requiem mass has an inherent venerability in being one of the oldest musical genres in Europe. Stemming from Gregorian chant, the requiem mass as we recognize it today emerged throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, when ecclesiastical authorities began narrowing down the vast repertory of chants appropriate for inclusion in it.² By Fauré's time, apart from some limited freedom that composers may have had in excluding or substituting certain chants, the requiem mass set had been

¹ Carlos Caballero, *Fauré and French musical aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 176.

² Theodore Karp, et al, "Requiem Mass," *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed February 28, 2017, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/43221>.

widely standardized. Therefore, when considering Fauré's *Requiem*, it is his chosen mass set that first stands out to us—"Introit et Kyrie," "Offertoire," "Sanctus," "Pie Jesu," "Agnus Dei," "Libera Me," and "In Paradisum."

Fauré's decisions to include "Libera Me" and "Pie Jesu" in the *Requiem* set were unorthodox for the time, but, by Caballero's description, did not seem radical or unwarranted to the *Requiem*'s earliest audiences.³ The two most glaring departures from standards would have been the inclusion of the antiphon "In Paradisum" and the omission of the expected "Dies Irae." Not by any coincidence, these two pieces present a dichotomy that immediately reveals something about Fauré's spiritual beliefs. "Dies Irae" speaks of Judgement Day, of God's fiery wrath, and of "calamity and misery"; "In Paradisum" speaks of peaceful deliverance, salvation, and "requiem aeternam" in paradise. The latter movement does not only displace the former—it subverts it. Clearly, if Fauré held any theistic beliefs, it was not in an angry god, but in a gentle one.

We also see Fauré's religious biases reflected in his subtle manipulations of the mass text. His most interesting modification is perhaps in the "Offertoire," where the usual "libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum" ("liberate the souls of all the faithful departed") was changed to the unconditional "libera animas defunctorum" (simply, "liberate the souls of the departed").⁴ Fauré's undisputed skill as a composer leaves no one to think that he did this accidentally or for the purpose of making the text easier to set. Rather, it's as though Fauré felt the need to edit the liturgy in order for it to be inclusive of a larger crowd—the not-so-faithful departed. As Louis Laloy described in his review of the *Requiem*: "For here is a Paradise without a hell, where the soul, without being judged, is admitted by right of innocence or by right of beauty..."⁵ Nowhere else in the requiem is the subject of faithfulness raised.

³ Carlos Caballero, *Fauré and French musical aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 186.

⁴ James Liu C.S, "Choral Music Notes - Gabriel Fauré Requiem in d, Op. 48," <http://www.jamescsliu.com>, February 8, 2003, accessed February 27, 2017, http://www.jamescsliu.com/classical/Faure_Requiem.html.

⁵ Ibid.

We would expect to find these same spiritual ideals expressed in the music of the *Requiem*. Indeed, the work's profound serenity and radiant harmonies have often been remarked upon; the piece has been described as a "profound meditation [undisturbed by] inquietude or agitation,"⁶ and most famously as a "lullaby of death."⁷ This is not to say that this requiem is saccharine; there are moments of genuine pathos that seem to convey, if nothing else, an acknowledgement of the grief associated with death, and other moments that speak directly to the subject of divine wrath and judgement—it is these moments that are especially interesting to examine.

Two movements of the *Requiem* stand out with their darker tone: the "Offertoire," with its supplication to save souls from being "swallowed up by Hell," and "Libera Me," with its brief quotation of the otherwise-absent "Dies Irae." Let us first consider the "Offertoire": its tenebrous colour (B minor overall) and foreboding fugal motif might encourage most choirs to perform this section with the same funereal drama as the "Kyrie" from Mozart's requiem setting. But closer inspection suggests that this is likely not what Fauré intended; the opening⁸ is not only marked "pianissimo," but "dolcissimo." Further instructions to this effect of "soft and sweet" pervade the movement. The only instance of the word "Tartarus" ("Hell") is painted not with orchestral thunder but with a shimmering harmonic shift at "sempre pianissimo."⁹ Again it seems as though the Infernal has been subverted, its threat reduced to a melancholy whisper.

"Libera Me" tells a slightly different story. Not only is this text focused on Revelation-esque calamity, but it climaxes with a jarring fortissimo declamation of "dies illa, dies irae" (m. 54 on score,¹⁰

⁶ Aaron Copland, "Gabriel Fauré, a Neglected Master," *The Musical Quarterly* 17.4 (1924): 579.

⁷ Carlos Caballero, *Fauré and French musical aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 189.

⁸ Gabriel Fauré, *Requiem, op. 48* (Paris: J.Hamele), II, m. 7, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II, m. 22, 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VI, m. 54, 100.

29:33 on recording).¹¹ This passage alone seems to undermine everything else that the *Requiem* stands for. But there may be a couple of justifications for its presence: firstly, musical contrast. Perhaps not since the Baroque era has an enduring work been composed that did not utilize contrast of color, tonality, and/or emotional affect—contrast being a cornerstone of both the Classical and Romantic traditions. Perhaps Fauré knew he could not write an effective requiem that clung only to serene optimism. This assumption supplements my second justification: dramatics, which seemingly could not exist in the music of Fauré without a degree of irony. The “*dies irae*” declamation stands out so strikingly from its surroundings with its plodding harmonic rhythm, perfect eight-bar phrases, and pompous march tempo that it comes across as either hysteric or sarcastic. If this is true, that sarcasm isn’t likely to have registered with audiences of Fauré’s day, but “*Libera Me*” nonetheless succeeds in providing the emotional counterpoint that the *Requiem* calls for.

Having imposed our own interpretations on this work, we must also ask: What did Fauré himself say about his *Requiem*? In a 1910 letter to Maurice Emmanuel (as quoted in C.S. Liu’s notes), he claimed that he composed the work “for nothing . . . for fun, if I may be permitted to say so”¹²—a shocking statement that seems to undermine any deeper meaning such as we’ve been reading into the *Requiem* so far. Perhaps a more accurate response came eleven years later, in a letter to René Fauchois: “Everything I managed to entertain in the way of religious illusion I put into my *Requiem*, which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.”¹³ These two remarks may be synthesized to infer that Fauré did not care much for the sanctity or formalism of religion (his first remark is anything but reverent toward the concept of a requiem), but saw its deeper purpose in “human feelings.” Whatever

¹¹ Gabriel Fauré, *Requiem, op. 48*, performed by Atlanta Symphony Orchestra and Atlanta Symphony Chorus conducted by Robert Shaw (Telarc – CD-80135), CD, 1987.

¹² James Liu C.S, "Choral Music Notes - Gabriel Fauré Requiem in d, Op. 48," <http://www.jamesesliu.com>, February 8, 2003, accessed February 27, 2017, http://www.jamesesliu.com/classical/Faure_Requiem.html.

¹³ *Ibid.*

“fun” Fauré may have had in writing his *Requiem*, it should be clear by our examination of this work that he had poignant intentions.

It’s worth noting the impact that the *Requiem* had at the time of its publication—according to Caballero, “its success was widespread and immediate”¹⁴ even while Fauré was not yet well known. Even critics who reproached him for taking too many liberties with the text, such as François Verhest, nonetheless lauded the work for its “real religious sentiment” (quoted by Caballero).¹⁵ If Fauré was not a master mimic capable of manufacturing a “religious sentiment” he did not have, he had tapped into a level of humanistic spirituality that reached beyond religious formalism. This is especially evident when we consider the state of religion at the time; according to Frederic Beiser (as quoted by Gareth Steadman Jones), “by the end of the eighteenth century, both theism and deism were on their last legs,”¹⁶ thanks in part to the revelations of the Enlightenment and the advances in science and philosophy that followed. Agnosticism and atheism were becoming increasingly widespread among the academic community and those who found issue with the Church of their day. For a requiem to gain such renown at a time of religious crisis, one must assume that it presented religion in a form more palatable than the doctrines of the Church.

In summary, it would seem that Fauré’s *Requiem* was born out of a desire for faith in a gentler, humbler religion—one where the threats of a damning deity are eclipsed by the unconditional promise of eternal rest in paradise. The *Requiem*’s status as an enduring masterpiece speaks not only to the universality of that desire, but just as much to its success in helping satisfy that desire for its listeners.

¹⁴ Carlos Caballero, *Fauré and French musical aesthetics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 189

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 189

¹⁶ Gareth Steadman Jones, "Religion and Liberty in European Political Thought 1800–1860 Ca.," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17.5 (2012): 588.

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