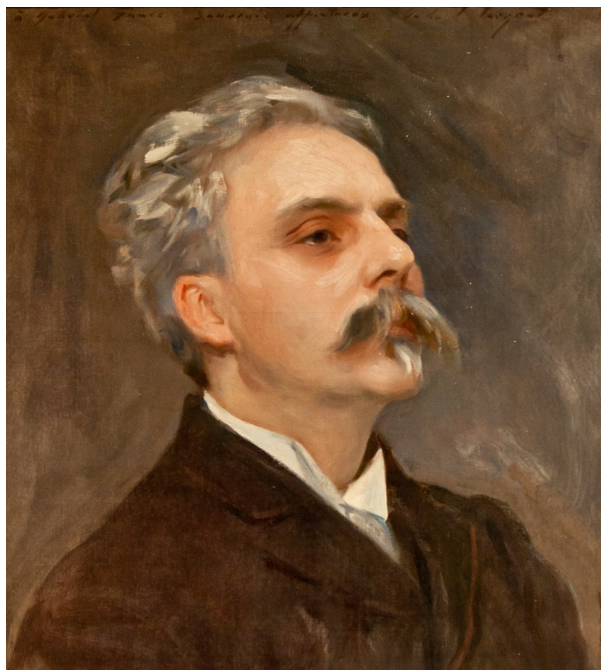


## “I wanted to do something different”: The Fauré *Requiem*

The path of the innovator is not always smooth. And the road was a little rocky at first for both Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem* and William Walton’s *Belshazzar’s Feast*—both of which will be performed at the Peterborough Singers’ May concert.

Although Fauré enjoyed an eminent reputation in France in the early nineteenth century, he was not so highly valued outside of it. American composer and conductor Aaron Copland went so far as to call Fauré a “neglected master,” in 1924, adding that “no other composer has ever been so generally ignored outside his own country.”

Why? Copland goes on to say that Fauré, who was in his forties when he wrote the *Requiem*, had been pigeonholed by older critics, who thought of him as a composer of intimate salon music. And as for the younger critics, Copland explains that they were “taken up” with Debussy and Impressionism so ignored the innovations of the composer’s last and arguably finest period of composition.



John Singer Sargent’s Portrait of Fauré, 1889

The *Requiem* belongs to that period. It was composed during 1888 and first performed in January 1889, but the piece had only five movements then. Over the next four years, Fauré added various voices, instruments, and settings, including the now-famous “Libera me.” And finally, at his publisher’s insistence, he produced the larger-scale work that we know today. That version premiered in July 1890 at the Trocadéro in Paris.

During this long birth, the *Requiem* was “passed over in silence . . . due to the fact that Fauré’s originality was never one of the obtrusive sort,” according to Copland.

And what is original about the Fauré *Requiem*? For one thing, the composition is on a humbler and more human scale than the grand operatic settings of the “Mass for the Dead” that were typical at the time. It leaves out the usual “Dies irae” (days of wrath) and “Tuba mirum” (the trumpet call to judgment). And it includes two sections that are not standard fare: the lovely and now famous soprano aria “Pie Jesu” and the transcendent, soaring “In paradisum” (into paradise). The prevailing mood is peaceful and serene; the only struggle is the fight toward the freedom of release. There is no “Last Judgment.” Here is how Fauré described the work in a 1902 interview.

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It has been said that my *Requiem* does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death. But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience. The music of Gounod has been criticized for its overinclination towards human tenderness. But his nature predisposed him to feel this way: religious emotion took this form inside him. Is it not necessary to accept the artist’s nature? As to my *Requiem*, perhaps I have also instinctively sought to escape from what is thought right and proper, after all the years of accompanying burial services on the organ! I know it all by heart. I wanted to write something different.

Mission accomplished!

The reputation of Fauré's *Requiem* grew during the last half of the twentieth century. Now it is a frequently performed and well-loved part of the established choral repertoire. It also holds a special place in our culture as a response to grief and violence. It is sung regularly in Canada during Remembrance Day services or concerts, for example, and benefits and memorials have presented it as a comfort after tragedies such as 9/11, the siege of Sarajevo, and the attacks in Paris in 2015. The work is also firmly on the radar in popular films and television shows. Many movies have incorporated excerpts into their soundtracks, including *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Salt* (2010), not to mention its use in television series such as *Madam Secretary* and, of course, *Endeavour* and *Inspector Morse*.