

For the Love of the Amateur Singer

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The French Canadian playwright Michel Tremblay attained notoriety in the 1970s for his audacious portraits of the East end Montreal—the francophone ghetto of bone chilling poverty and rough manners. In works like *Les Belles Soeurs* a group of middle-aged sisters reveal the chaotic vitality of their down and out lives across a kitchen table as they fill books of grocery store stamps to redeem for formica finery. It is the world of basement bingo delivered in *joual*, the rich and raw patois of working class urban Quebec. Tremblay's *québécois verismo* was a revolution in Canadian theatre, the first time the hard-edged language Montreal's meanest streets was served up to downtown audiences. And no sooner had he persuaded theatre goers of the compelling human dramas to be found there, than he turned his insightful eye and ear on its social antithesis.

L'Impromptu d'Outrement, which first appeared in 1980, brings together another group of sisters. Lucille, a bitter spinster who studied ballet for a dozen years but never danced, is observing her 40th birthday. In a sepulchral drawing room on the edge of a fashionable Montreal suburb, her three sisters join her in an evening marked by deep-rooted hostilities and personal emptiness. The cast includes Fernande, the doyenne who married a mediocre architect to protect her social station, trading a promising career as a writer for the bottle; Lorraine, the rebel who abandoned Outrement for life with an Italian landscaper; and the emotionally delicate Yvette. Yvette is a singer, a singer who cherished fond hopes of having a career. In the salons of semi-aristocratic Montreal, her limpid voice had been the requisite "set piece" of every social gathering. Yvette's talent was the measure of social status for her ambitious mother. But when Yvette dared to dream of a career, her own ambitions were quashed. Tremblay constructs the most telling moment of the play when, at the close of Act I, Yvette offers her contribution to the birthday party, a performance of Gabriel Fauré's *Après un rêve*.

In a sleep made sweet by a vision of you
I dreamed of happiness, passionate illusion;
your eyes were more tender, your voice pure and ringing,
you shone like a sky lighted by the dawn.

You called me and I left the earth
to fly with you towards the light,
the skies drew apart their clouds for us,
unknown splendours, glimpses of divine fires . . .

Alas, alas, sad awakening from dreams!
I invoke you, O night, give me back your illusions;
return, return, in radiance,
return, O mysterious night!

Tremblay doubtless had his reasons for selecting this particular song to mark the climax of the play. The text is emblematic of Yvette's disoriented world "after a dream"—indeed of the illusion-rich world of all four sisters. Tremblay is none too subtle in his depiction of the

delusional state of social pretension. But there is another, perhaps more compelling reason for Yvette to sing this particular song. Fauré's *Après un rêve* is the quintessential song for the amateur singer. For those who aspire to sing art music "for the love of it" no other work in the repertoire better fits the bill.

Composed in 1878 and published in that same year as his Opus 7/1, *Après un rêve* is easily one of Fauré's most beloved and most performed songs. Its text, an anonymous—and therefore mildly exotic—Tuscan verse translated by Romain Bussine, details the archetypal conceit of Symbolist poetry: an ardent, spiritual and carnal love which evaporates with the passing of the mysterious night. Mallarmé's rendition of the same image was more subtle and more complex; in *L'Après-midi d'une faune* he opens with the question: "Was it but a dream?" Fauré's title declares: "After a dream." But the territory is clearly the same, a sensual half-consciousness where judgment is banished by longing; sensation obliterates reason.

The song was composed for the voice of Henriette Fuchs, a trained musician, but by social standing, an amateur. Madame Fuchs was one from among the legion of proficient amateurs who animated the bourgeois salons of late nineteenth-century Paris. She was the driving force behind an amateur choir of importance in the city, La Concordia conducted by none other than Charles Widor and counting among its stable of accompanists Gabriel Fauré and the young Claude Debussy. According to the ruling impresario of the day, Gabriel Astruc, Henriette Fuchs had an appealing "limpid" voice (Astruc, 1929).

The grounds for a perfect marriage between Fauré's song writing style and the limpid purity of an amateur voice are easy to hypothesize in *Après un rêve*. The stable, though harmonically exotic, chordal accompaniment is within the technical grasp of any drawing room accompanist: for all its simplicity, a completely effective evocation of the dream state vanished. The vocal line is formed from a series of perfect little arches, offering an illusion of long line in a series of short, singable phrases. Chiefly syllabic and eminently respectful of the word, the six-note melisma that articulates the end of alternate phrases adds a patina of lyricism without taxing the voice. Similarly the largely stepwise motion which assures a transparency of diction is punctuated only occasionally by dramatic leaps of a 5th or 6th—typically of Fauré these leaps are downward, not up. While the vocal range is broad—an octave and a fourth—it is administered with care, residing chiefly in the safe tessitura above the break. The high Fs and single G are carefully rationed and well prepared, while only two phrases—one preparatory for the climax and the other at the song's end—lie below the break. Fauré reserves his vocal "events"—the melismatic turns, the downward leaps of a sixth or an octave, the high G climax—to support the text and its structure. Not surprisingly these elements come together around the line "*Hélas! Hélas triste réveil des songes!*" by which time the voice is "in" and the dramatic intensity supports the relative extremes to which the voice is taken.

In short *Après un rêve* does not rely on power or technique to deliver its effect. Nuance subtlety are written in the score which the singer need only execute to attain its full effect. Illusions of breadth in line are simple to achieve. Fauré has assured a perfect harmony between the dramatic delivery of its musical and textual message and the capabilities of the amateur—or student—singer.

The appeal of this early opus by Fauré has been almost universal since it was composed, popular from its first performance at a *Société nationale* concert in 1879. It was a cornerstone in every one of the programs devoted to Fauré's songs during his lifetime. No less than Marcel Proust, who preferred the more abstract *mélodies* of Fauré's later career, observed in 1894

that *Après un rêve* was the most admired of Fauré's songs. But the attraction to Fauré among amateur singers is scarcely limited to *Après un rêve*. Nearly all the melodies collected in the first two of his three *recueils* of *mélodies* have found favour with singers. Published in 1879 and 1897, these two volumes contained 45 individual songs in all, a great many of which have remained staples of the student and amateur singer's repertoire. Songs like *Nell*, which was premiered at the same 1879 concert as *Après un rêve* bear a rare trait in French repertoire—an almost folk-like simplicity in its vocal writing. More illusion than reality, the apparent simplicity of the vocal line carries with it Fauré's trademark modal chromaticism while the accompaniment busies itself constructing the artifice. But other examples are more clear cut. The composer's Lydian-mode signature song *Lydia*, and the equally popular *Le Secret* both employ stepwise melody writing almost throughout. Fauré's use of tessitura is always judicious, permitting the voice to hover comfortably within a specific area of the voice, even when, as in *Les Berceaux*, the entire song spans close to two octaves. When, as here, Fauré does indulge in extended register, he thoughtfully provides an *ossia* version, opening songs to voices of more restricted capabilities. Phrase lengths are typically short, providing access to this repertoire for the "less-than-iron-lunged," as evidenced in a popular pair of love songs: *Rêve d'amour* and *Chanson d'amour*, both of which are deftly constructed in two-bar phrases which, despite their deliberate breathless excitement, manage to communicate a sense of long line. Indeed among the first 25 years of Fauré's song production—a period which includes almost all of his most performed works—the exceptions prove the rule. Quite unique among these 40+ songs are *mélodies* like *Notre amour* with its climactic high B (to which Fauré provides a more comfortable *ossia* A), the heroic *Le Voyageur*, or *Fleur jetée* with its Erlkönig-like virtuosity. These alone among the songs in the first two collections make a whole different range of demands on the voice (and the accompanist). They signify the recognition, among Fauré's compositional assumptions, of different categories of singers for whom different types of songs might be written.

Fauré had another connection with the amateur singer which can be put under the microscope. Until his appointment as director of the Conservatoire in 1905, Fauré's principal livelihood was as a church musician. An organist and choir master, the fruits of his keyboard activity in the church are lost to the vapours of unrecorded improvisation. But he did contribute substantially to the choral repertoire. His *Requiem*, first composed in 1877 and reworked in several different versions up to 1900, is the most celestial of the Masses for the Dead. With the omission of the *Dies irae*'s brimstone and fire, Fauré's take on the afterlife resides completely "In Paradisum," making the work a heavenly experience for the amateur singer as well. Alone among the mighty handful of choral requiems, and despite its well deserved place in the concert repertoire, Fauré's *Requiem* respects the limits of an amateur choir. Less well known than the *Requiem* are the twenty or so other sacred choral works in the Fauré oeuvre. Among these only the ethereal *Cantique de Jean Racine* continues to enjoy a position in the performed repertoire. And while the others—accompanied duos and trios, SATB choruses with or without soloist—are works of lesser interest musically, they offer solid documentation of the kind of music Fauré wrote with the church singer—often an amateur—in mind. Typical of these works is a *Tantum Ergo* published as Fauré's Opus 79 in 1904. Scored for soprano or tenor soloist with SATB and organ accompaniment, the setting offers two strophes of the Latin hymn, the first set for soloist with organ accompaniment, the second transfers (and doubles) the organ accompaniment to SATB chorus. A five measure "Amen"

coda is tagged to the end. The simplicity of the structure is mirrored in the simplicity of compositional technique and vocal demands. Were it not for the bass's drop to the low G \flat on the final note, each voice range would stay within a minor ninth or octave. The constrained alto part stays within a major sixth. The vocal writing is predominantly conjunct—even in the solo part with only one melodic leap (twice repeated) exceeding a perfect fifth.² It is also almost exclusively syllabic across both strophes. The tagged "Amen" is distinguished chiefly for the relatively florid two-note melismas that seem to echo across the score. The "Amen" is also the only section of the work which is not exclusively homorhythmic. The end result is a work which is as graceful to sing as it is easy to read—meeting two of the most essential requirements of the amateur singer. What identifies these as striking characteristics is the date of composition. In 1904 Fauré was hard at his enigmatic symbolist opera *Pénélope*. He was but a few years away from his tonally-elusive late chamber music repertoire which included the two Piano Quintets, the Piano Trio and String Quartet, works which were vastly more abstract and modernist than the much earlier and much more conventional C Minor Piano Quartet. In other words, this *Tantum Ergo* is a stylistic anachronism; an evocation of a compositional style that was no longer Fauré's current language. The conservatism may be credited in part to the context—the church; but it seems to be no less a recognition of the needs of the performers. Fauré had a distinctive set of compositional assumptions when writing for the amateur voice.

Analysis of a number of Fauré's sacred choral works produces comparable results. In the vast majority, vocal range never exceeds minor ninth and pitch choice is restricted largely to scale degrees augmented by Fauré's signature $\sharp 4$ and $\flat 6$, more indicative of modal cross-references than of dominant tonicization. In all, approximately 78% of all the part-writing is stepwise with fewer than 4% of all melodic intervals being leaps which exceed the perfect fifth. Almost without exception the writing is both syllabic and homorhythmic in the SATB sections.

From this it's easy enough to see why amateur singers love Fauré. But why did Fauré love the amateur singer? There's a straightforward answer that it would be irresponsible not to mention. Most of the amateur singers of Fauré's acquaintance were lovely young women. Before his respectable, but chilly marriage to the daughter of famous sculptor Edouard Fremiet, Fauré had been engaged to Marianne Viardot, the daughter of singer/composer Pauline Viardot—one of the very few women of higher social status to maintain a professional career in music. Fauré's affection for young women was, if anything, multiplied after his marriage. He was, for example, among the numerous lovers of Emma Bardac—the eventual second wife of Debussy—for whom he wrote *La Bonne chanson*. He met most of these young women in the Parisian salons he frequented or in the studios of a select group of singing teachers who cultivated the amateur talents of the haute bourgeois. Among these latter we can cite Marie Trelat, wife of a noted surgeon whose "Fridays" were frequented by the like of Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Gounod, and Duparc alongside poets Renan, Sully Prudhomme. Madame Trelat was also the vocal tutor of numerous *cantatrices mondaines*, young women of privilege who sought distinction in the salons through their singing. Far from being merely a propagator of salon mediocrity, Marie Trelat was a fine and sensitive musician. Of her Fauré wrote that she was

a rare musician . . . not a professional singer; and yet, she was the equal of many of the great divas of that lost age, the age of bel canto. Supported by a technique which was her greatest asset, she possessed a very pure art, an enlightened awareness, and a deeply moving sensitivity. (Fauré, 1914, p. 2)

Lest this leave the queasy impression that Fauré's interest in the amateur singer was chiefly salacious, there is a much more compelling explanation of the composer's interest in the amateur voice. It is implicit in the quote above. To Fauré the age of the great professional singer was, at the turn of the last century, already a lost age. Fauré's opera-mad Paris was populated by a great many professional singers whom he simply could not abide. Of a famous soprano of the stage who proposed to perform his songs he wrote,

As to Mlle Righi, I don't know if I've ever actually heard anything about her, but the mere fact that she is a dramatic soprano makes me fear that she will be incapable of performing my songs which require a calm and peaceful voice. (Linden, 1950, p. 99)

In a letter of 4 August 1900, Fauré described the Brussels's opera baritone Vallier who sang in the first concert performance of his Requiem as "appalling. A true opera singer, he understood absolutely nothing of the calm and solemnity of his part in this Requiem" (Fauré, 1980, p. 241).

Fauré's disillusionment with professional singers was the flip side of a coin which expressed his value for the amateur singer. In a telling letter from 1902 addressed to salon matron Elisabeth Greffulhe, Fauré (1980) confessed:

I'm certain that there are a great many of my songs from the most recent years that you don't know yet! I dream that you will be able to hear them sung by the ideal performers, none of whom will be found among the ranks of professional singers. Rather it is the amateurs who understand me and transmit my intentions best. (p. 249)

This interpretation is confirmed by the young critic Louis Aguetant who recorded his impressions of a conversation with Fauré in 1902.

Fauré spoke to me about his performers—amateurs like Bagès, Mme Bardac, Mlle Girette, and others—who, he said, came closer to realizing his musical intentions than the professionals did. The professional singers want to "exteriorize" everything. They remove the charm of intimacy from music. (Aguettant, 1982)

What the amateur singer may lack in technique, in range, in virtuosity, in power were for Fauré advantages not handicaps. Much of Fauré's vocal writing, as observed in his individual songs and in his choral music was conceived not to overwhelm, but to charm. In the amateur performer Fauré sought and found an accomplice in charm. His vocal writing reveals an "exquisite preference for subtle simplicity"—for the love of the amateur singer.

Reference List

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Endnotes

¹ Translation by Winnifred Radford in Bemac (1978).

² Exception is noted for the harmonic bass which contains a few octave leaps.
