

## Programme notes for Langlais *Messe Solennelle* and Fauré *Requiem, Op.48*

### Messe Solennelle

Jean Langlais (1907-1991)

The career of Jean Langlais has many parallels to that of Louis Vierne, whose *Messe Solennelle* RCS performed in March 2015. Both were blind (although Langlais was not born blind, he had completely lost all sight by the age of 3 and had “no memory of light”) and both had the good fortune to attend the *Institution National des Jeunes Aveugles* (National Institute for Blind Youth) in Paris. This remarkable boarding school fostered the musical talents of numerous eminent blind French musicians from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowing them to begin musical careers which many would undoubtedly never have had without it. Langlais certainly considered himself to be one such; his father was a stone-cutter and his mother a seamstress, and he explained his refusal to visit Lourdes after his friend Marie Bigot regained her sight following a visit to the shrine by saying, “If I could see like everyone else, I would have followed in my father’s footsteps as a stone-cutter. One must believe that the Virgin Mary had other plans for me, which came about because of my blindness. So may her will be done.” He began attending the Institution at the age of ten, first studying violin, but his musical imagination was captured by the organ after he heard other students practising on the three Cavallé-Coll organs which the Institution possessed. At the age of 16 he began organ lessons with André Marchal, another blind organist who had attended the Institution as a child. In adulthood, Langlais, like Marchal, returned to teach at the Institution, doing so for forty years.

In 1927, Langlais (again like Vierne) entered the Paris Conservatoire as an organ student under Marcel Dupré, where his contemporaries included Duruflé and Messiaen. He received the *Premier Prix d’Orgue* in 1930 and commenced lessons in improvisation from Charles Tournemire, the *organiste titulaire* of the Church of Sainte-Clotilde in Paris. By now Langlais was composing more and more and commenced lessons with Paul Dukas, who taught him orchestration. Dukas told Langlais, ‘You are a born composer’.

Langlais held positions as organist in several Parisian churches and in 1945 became *titulaire* at Sainte-Clotilde, remaining in that position until 1987. He became a noted recitalist, especially in America which he toured extensively, giving almost 300 recitals and master classes. He almost seemed to refuse to acknowledge his blindness, refusing to have a guide dog and sustaining a number of serious traffic accidents as a result. In 1984 he suffered a stroke which left him with partial brain damage, but he recovered to the extent that he was able to begin to give organ recitals again, giving one to great acclaim at Notre Dame in 1986 at the age of 79. He died in Paris in 1991, aged 84.

Langlais’s method of composition was remarkable. He would compose a piece in his head in great detail over a long period, then write it in shorthand in Braille, then dictate the name of every note and its rhythmic value to an amanuensis to produce the full score. Although this transcription process was laborious, it was accomplished comparatively quickly because the mental process had been so rigorous; Langlais said of tonight’s *Messe Solennelle* that he had thought about it for twelve years and composed it in thirteen days.

Despite this cumbersome compositional process, Langlais was a prolific composer, writing almost three hundred pieces for organ and a large number of choral works.

Tonight's work was composed in 1951 and is very much in the tradition of French masses from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which were composed specifically for liturgical use. As a result, despite its title of *Messe Solennelle*, it is a comparatively short work, unlike, for example, the *Missa Solemnis* of Beethoven. Like Vierne's *Messe Solennelle*, the Credo is not set, though the title *Solemn Mass* would usually indicate that the Ordinary of the Mass was set in full; technically, a mass such as this should be called a *Missa Brevis*.

### **Kyrie**

A solemn organ introduction begins the Kyrie, after which the vocal parts enter one at a time and independently, as though in a fugue, though there is actually no fugal aspect. The tenor line repeats the same motif five times throughout the opening Kyrie. The *Christe* is characterised by constantly changing and irregular time signatures, interrupted by vast organ outbursts.

### **Gloria**

Each sentence of the text is given a clearly-defined section in the Gloria, with each one separated from the next by dramatic organ passages. Like the Kyrie, each section has a fugal feel, though none is worked out in a fully fugal way, and the texture becomes homophonic at the words "miserere nobis". A short reflective passage for organ is followed by a repeat of the opening music to the text "Quoniam tu solus sanctus", the music again becoming homophonic from "Jesu Christe" to the end.

### **Sanctus**

The Sanctus begins with a sequence of two rising passages in the organ culminating in a fortissimo fanfare of acclamation from the choir. This movement does not have any of the fugal feel of much of the rest of the work, the unison texture seeming more appropriate to a pæan of praise

### **Benedictus**

Again, this section begins with an organ introduction built on passages of chromatically descending perfect fifths, fourths and thirds. The text is set to a serene melody for sopranos and altos in unison an octave apart. The music of the Sanctus is reprised for the concluding Hosanna.

### **Agnus Dei**

Another descending figure on the organ introduces the Agnus Dei, followed by imitative ascending lines for the choir. The main part of the movement uses a variety of textual devices, again beginning with a fugal feel, and concludes with a fortissimo major chord, as though in the full expectation that peace will indeed be granted.

## **Requiem, Op.48**

## **Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)**

Gabriel Fauré was born in the south of France to solid lower-middle class parents. The family had once been substantial landowners but had gone down in the world, and Gabriel's father was a schoolmaster who later became a headmaster. His mother, though from a family of minor nobility, brought no fortune to the marriage. There was no musical aptitude or interest in the family, so the pure chance of an old blind woman hearing the boy play the harmonium at his father's school led to the nurturing of a talent which might otherwise have withered unrecognised. She advised his father that Gabriel had musical talent and should be sent away for tuition, and in 1853, aged 9, he and his father took the three day trip to Paris so that he could enrol

at the recently opened *École de Musique Classique et Religieuse* (always known as the *École Niedermeyer*, after its founder) where Fauré remained for 11 years. From 1851, the professor of piano at the *École* was Saint-Saëns, and Fauré became his protégé and most distinguished pupil, leading to a close, lifelong friendship. As was the fate of many 19<sup>th</sup> century French musicians, after graduating in 1865 Fauré became a church organist. His post was in Rennes in Brittany, but it was not a success. He was bored at Rennes and his relationship with the parish priest was not good; it did not take the good father long to realise that his new organist's religious convictions were not deep. At the Sunday Mass, Fauré regularly absented himself during the sermon for a cigarette, and in early 1870, when he turned up to play at Mass one Sunday still in his evening clothes, having been out all night at a ball, he was asked to resign. A perhaps unexpected aspect of Fauré's life followed. The Franco-Prussian War broke out in July 1870 and he volunteered for military service. He took part in the action to raise the Siege of Paris, saw action at Le Bourget, Champigny and Créteil, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre. It is quite difficult to associate the composer of such restrained, subtle, undemonstrative music with such heroics.

When he returned to Paris in 1871, Fauré was appointed choir master at St Sulpice, assisting Widor, and in 1874 he moved to the Madeleine as deputy organist to his friend Saint-Saëns, taking over as choirmaster in 1877 and eventually becoming *titulaire* in 1896. He remained at the Madeleine until 1905, when he was appointed director of the Paris Conservatoire. One particularly intriguing aspect of Fauré's life was that although he spent a large proportion of it in ecclesiastical positions and was described by Saint-Saëns as "a first class organist when he wanted to be", he left not a single composition for the organ and only three religious works (tonight's *Requiem*, the *Messe Basse* and the very brief *Cantique de Jean Racine*) of any significance. He seems to have had very little interest in the sort of music which was central to his professional life for 40 years. Fauré retired from the Conservatoire in 1920 at the age of 75, dying four years later.

Tonight's *Requiem* had a rather tortuous gestation until it reached the form in which it is usually performed today. He probably began work on it in 1886 or early 1887, and its first form consisted of only the Introit and Kyrie, Sanctus, Pie Jesu, Agnus Dei, and In Paradisum. It was first performed in this form at the funeral of a wealthy parishioner of the Madeleine in 1888, after which the priest in charge told the composer, "We don't need these novelties: the Madeleine's repertoire is quite rich enough." The first version of the *Requiem* was scored for violas, cellos, and basses, organ, harp, and timpani, with a short solo for violin. For a concert performance at the Madeleine later in 1888, Fauré added a pair of horns and a pair of trumpets. In 1893 the *Requiem* was again performed at the Madeleine and Fauré added two new movements, the Offertorium and Libera me, which had been composed in 1877 as an independent work for baritone solo and organ. The final version of the *Requiem* was rescored for full orchestra and premiered at the Trocadéro in Paris in July 1900, as part of the Exposition Universelle (World's Fair). This final version became standard until in the mid-1980s, when John Rutter reconstructed the original orchestration of the 1893 version from Fauré's manuscripts, and it is this version which we are performing tonight.

When asked in 1910 about what had prompted the writing of the *Requiem*, Fauré said "My *Requiem* was composed for nothing . . . for fun, if I may be permitted to say so." Fauré's father had died in 1885, and the earliest sketches for movements of the *Requiem* appeared within the next two years, though Fauré never spoke of having written the work in memory of his father. In an odd turn of fate, the composer's mother died two weeks before the *Requiem*'s first performance, but its performance

was for the Madeleine parishioner Joseph Lesoufaché, and not in any way as a memorial to her. We do, however, know that Fauré was affected deeply by the deaths of his parents.

Fauré's *Requiem* is undoubtedly one of the most loved works in the choral repertoire, but its popularity has been an entirely post-war phenomenon. Elgar, who was a great admirer of Fauré's music, had tried to persuade the committee of the Three Choirs Festival to perform the work, but without success, and its British premiere was not until 1937. RCS embraced the work quite early, our first performance being in 1949 with a further two performances during the 1950s. It was not really until the 1960s that the *Requiem* achieved its present status.

Like Brahms in his *Deutsches Requiem*, by the simple expedient of not setting them to music, Fauré almost entirely avoided the very aspects of the funeral service which had been of particular interest to composers such as Verdi and Berlioz – the drama of the vision of the end of the world in the Dies irae. In an interview he gave in 1902, Fauré said, "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.... 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." Perhaps some of these thoughts reflect the bouts of depression from which he suffered at times throughout his adult life. In 1921 he wrote to a friend, "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." The popularity of Fauré's *Requiem* is perhaps partly because of this; few nowadays believe in a hell of fire, brimstone and devilish torment, and the consolatory tone of the piece make it a *Requiem* which chimes in with the present *zeitgeist* in a way that many 19<sup>th</sup> century versions no longer do.

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