

Gabriel Fauré

JIM'S PRESENTATION ON 16 MAY 2020 MARKING THE 175th ANNIVERSARY OF THE COMPOSER'S BIRTH ON 12 MAY

Nocturne no. 1 in E flat minor op. 33 no. 1 (c. 1875)

Hannes Minnaar (piano)

Challenge Records recording from January 2016

Fauré wrote thirteen nocturnes for piano. No. 1 is one of the most memorable. The recurring figure which emerges as the second section begins is one of those 'hooks' which immediately attracts attention and makes the piece stand out from the crowd.

Hannes Minnaar has this to say in the CD booklet:

This is an atmospheric piece that at first glance appears to last just a single page. On turning this page, however, we discover that the nocturnal, becalmed opening scene was merely the prelude to a restless and occasionally stormy episode. Fauré uses original pianistic textures, for instance passages where the left hand crosses over the right to pick out a rhythmically simplified version of the melody. And when the opening theme returns, after some swirling decorative work, the thumbs of both hands play a counterpoint of repeated notes. The coda (whose melody is written in the Phrygian mode) had already made an appearance in one of his earliest songs and also crops up in sketches for the First Violin Sonata, so we can date this piece long before it was published in 1884.

Dolly Suite op. 56 (original version for piano four hands)

I. Berceuse — II. Mi-a-ou — III. Jardin de Dolly — IV. Kitty-Valse — V. Tendresse — VI. Pas espagnol

Pascal and Ami Rogé (Piano duo)

Onyx Classics recording from July 2009

The Dolly Suite is a collection for piano duet. It consists of six short pieces written or revised between 1893 and 1896 for Régina-Hélène Bardac (1892–1985), known to her family as Dolly (she was later to become Madame Gaston de Tinan), the young daughter of the singer Emma Bardac, with whom Fauré had a long-running affair (Emma Bardac, incidentally, went on to marry Debussy in 1908). He was in the practice of sending pieces of music, in manuscript, to mark Dolly's birthdays and other family occasions.

In a marked departure from his customary practice, Fauré gave each of the six movements a descriptive, sometimes whimsical, title. Ordinarily he disliked fanciful titles for musical pieces, and maintained that he would not use even such generic titles as 'barcarolle' unless his publishers insisted upon them. His son Philippe recalled, 'he would far rather have given his Nocturnes, Impromptus, and even his Barcarolles the simple title Piano Piece number so-and-so'.

The **Berceuse**, marking Dolly's first birthday, was a very early piece, composed in 1864 for Suzanne Garnier, the daughter of a family friend. In 1893 Fauré made some small amendments and changed its title from *La Chanson dans le jardin* to *Berceuse* – that is, a cradle song.

Mi-a-ou was written for Dolly's second birthday in June 1894. The title does not refer to a pet cat, as has often been supposed, but to Dolly's attempts to pronounce the name of her elder brother Raoul, who later became one of Fauré's favourite pupils. The young Dolly called her brother Messieu Aoul, which Fauré took as the original title for the piece. In his finished manuscript the title is shortened to *Miaou* (without hyphens). The Fauré scholar Robert Orledge writes that the title *Mi-a-ou*, like that of the *Kitty-valse* later in the suite, is the responsibility of Fauré's publisher, Julien Hamelle.

Le jardin de Dolly was composed as a present for New Year's Day 1895. It contains a quotation from Fauré's First Violin Sonata, composed 20 years earlier. The Fauré scholar Jean-Michel Nectoux

considers this ‘perhaps the jewel of the suite, with its lovely tune, moving harmonies and limpid, subtle counterpoint.’

Kitty-valse is no more feline in its reference than *Mi-a-ou*. The Bardacs’ pet dog was called Ketty, and in Fauré’s manuscript the piece is called *Ketty-Valse*. Nectoux calls this piece ‘a kind of whirling portrait’ of the animal.

Tendresse, written in 1896, was originally dedicated to Adela Maddison, wife of a music publisher. Like *Le Jardin de Dolly*, this piece is lyrical, but is in a more modern style, making use of chromaticism of the kind Fauré later deployed in his Nocturnes.

Le pas espagnol. The suite ends with a Spanish dance, a lively and picturesque piece of scene-painting, in the style of *España* by Fauré’s friend Emmanuel Chabrier.

— From Wikipedia

Masque et bergamasques op. 112

I. Ouverture, Allegro molto vivo — II. Menuet. Tempo di minuetto – Allegretto moderato —
III. Gavotte. Allegro vivo — IV. Pastorale. Andante tranquillo

Seattle Symphony Orchestra conducted by Ludovic Morlot

Seattle Symphony recording from October 2011

Aaron Copland, whose name is indelibly linked with the robust American populism of the 1930s and ’40s, might seem an unlikely admirer of one of the most subtle and refined of French composers. But in 1945 Copland wrote an enthusiastic appreciation of Gabriel Fauré, praising ‘his delicacy, his reserve, his imperturbable calm’, his ‘exquisite’ harmonies and ‘the transparent texture’ of his music, qualities that ‘constitute a kind of Fauré magic that is difficult to analyse but lovely to hear’.

Composed late in Fauré’s career, *Masques et bergamasques* is one of many artworks created during the early 20th century that reflect a fascination with commedia dell’arte, the improvised theatrical farce that flourished in Italy during the 16th and 17th centuries. (Other pieces of music of this kind include Stravinsky’s ballet *Pulcinella*, Schoenberg’s melodrama *Pierrot lunaire* and Puccini’s one-act opera *Gianni Schicchi*). In the summer of 1918, Fauré received a request from Raoul Gunsbourg, director of a theatre in Monte Carlo, for music to accompany a one-act entertainment with dance, spoken dialogue and pantomime.

The scenario Gunsbourg provided took its slender story line from French poet Paul Verlaine. It concerns Harlequin, Columbine and Gilles, French versions of traditional characters in commedia dell’arte. The plot has them enjoying a holiday on an imaginary and idyllic island when a group of French aristocrats comes ashore. Hiding in nearby bushes, the clowns observe a comedy unwittingly enacted by the four respectable couples, who engage in various flirtations and romantic dalliances. The work’s title, proposed by Fauré, also comes from Verlaine, whose poem “Claire de lune” (the inspiration for Debussy’s famous piano piece) begins:

*Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous leurs déguisements fantasques.*

*Your soul is a choice landscape
Where roam charming maskers and bergamaskers,
Playing the lute and dancing and almost
Sad beneath their fanciful disguises.*

The word ‘bergamasques’ evidently derives from the bergamasca, an old Italian dance, though Verlaine uses it simply to evoke music and dancing. For this theatre piece, which debuted in Monte Carlo in April of 1919, Fauré provided eight short musical numbers. In a letter to his wife, written just after the

premiere, Fauré described his music as being of an ‘evocative, melancholy — even somewhat nostalgic — character’, something that conforms perfectly to the tone of Verlaine’s poem.

Even before completing the music for *Masques et bergamasques*, the composer had decided that he would work some of it into a concert suite for orchestra. This consists of an *Ouverture* followed by three dances. The initial movements are modest and charming, with a hint of wistfulness behind their facades of mock-antique gaiety. The *Pastorale* that concludes the work recalls music from the *Ouverture*.

— *From the CD booklet*