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Graham Johnson, *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets*. Guildhall Research Studies. Burlington, VT and Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009. 488 pp. \$89.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 0754659607.

Review by William Gibbons, University of Iowa.

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924) was one of the leading composers of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, and, through his music, his criticism, and his position as director of the Paris Conservatoire, he exerted a significant influence over the direction of French music in the early twentieth century. Though he composed in a wide variety of genres, Fauré is probably best known today for his contributions to the *mélodie*, or French art song for voice and piano. Fauré set texts by some of the most influential poets of his day and the previous generation, including Hugo, Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, and Verlaine.

Graham Johnson's *Gabriel Fauré: The Song and their Poets* aims to give each of the composer's songs a thorough examination in terms of both the music and the poetry—as well as the interactions between these elements. Johnson is one of the foremost collaborative pianists working today, and the knowledge of the repertoire he has gained through years of performing is clearly in evidence here. *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* is, in fact, essentially a companion work to his multi-year project of recording of the complete Fauré songs (with a number of singers) for Hyperion records.

After an introductory chapter providing an overview of Fauré's position in music history, Johnson organizes the book's main chapters chronologically. Fauré tended to set texts by the same poet around the same time, so Johnson's approach allows him to create chapters that focus on individual or small groups of poets while maintaining the overall path through Fauré's musical development. This structure works best when Fauré was focused on one particular poet, as in the Verlaine period of the late 1880s and early 1890s (Chapters 8 and 9 of Johnson's book).

Each chapter opens with historical overview, followed by biographical notes on Fauré and the relevant poets. Johnson then discusses each song individually, addressing the musical features of each song and stressing the music's relationship to the poetry. Johnson's intimate knowledge of this music provides him with a unique vantage point, and consequently his descriptions of the songs are in many ways the high point of this book. Virtually every page is filled with fascinating anecdotes about the songs and their historical context gained from decades of performing and researching. Johnson is well known for the exceptionally high quality of his program and liner notes (designed to complement concerts and recordings), and overall his song descriptions in this book maintain the same feeling. His prose is generally breezy and humorous—if occasionally a bit purple—and the text seems aimed at providing easily digestible *morceaux* of information.

Perhaps for fear of alienating non-musicians, there are very few musical examples, although Johnson does not shy away from describing the music using somewhat technical language. Johnson's description of the 1902 song “La Fleur qui va sur l'eau” provides a representative example, as the author describes the “restless, but surprisingly delicate, semiquavers oscillating between the hands” in the piano accompaniment (p. 276). Readers who are not pianists may find imagery of this kind a bit off-putting; a musical example might at least provide a visual reference. (North American readers may also find the use of British note values—“semiquaver” rather than “sixteenth note,” for example—confusing.) Later

in the description of the same song, however, Johnson's insights are more accessible: "Despite the fingery detail that sets this cauldron rhythmically a-bubble, the composer also manages to suggest something fragile bobbing on the waves, a rose on the surface cradled by water that seems to simmer from beneath" (p. 276).

Along with the brief song analyses, each chapter contains elegant translations of the poetry by Richard Stokes alongside the French original. Fauré often altered the text of poetry when setting it to music, making it more mellifluous or dropping "unnecessary" stanzas; the printed poetry here reflects these song texts and does not include the originals. I would have appreciated being able to see exactly what words Fauré changed, or what text he considered uninteresting enough to omit, but Johnson's descriptions do provide the missing or altered text for Fauré's more egregious cuts.

Following the chronologically organized chapters on the songs and their creators, Johnson includes two chapters aimed squarely at interpreters of this music: Chapters fifteen and sixteen are "Some notes on the Performance of Fauré's Songs" and "The Pianist's Workshop (wherein Singers are Always Welcome)." These chapters offer numerous insights to performers that only someone of Johnson's experience would provide, mixing in a healthy dose of wry humor for good measure. Though unlikely to offer much for non-musicians, these chapters are among the best of the book, combining the author's understanding of Fauré's music with his passion for teaching.

Also included are two appendices, the first of which is a helpful guide to the songs byopus number (making it easy to identify which pieces were published together as a set). The second appendix is likely of less value, listing the tonality (i.e., the key of the piece) of each *mélodie*. The value of such an arcane exercise is, presumably, aiding performers in selecting pieces with complementary musical qualities (though I do not know many performers who routinely use this criterion for song selection).

Some of Johnson's more taxonomic tendencies, however, may also appeal to non-musicologists. He includes, for example, a listing of "Collections by Victor Hugo and their Musical Settings" (pp. 36–37), identifying composers who set the same texts or texts from the same poetic collections. As one example, "S'il est un charmant gazon," from Hugo's *Les Chants du crépuscule* (1835), was set to music by Franz Liszt, César Franck, and Camille Saint-Saëns as well as Fauré—an interesting commentary on Hugo's popularity at the *fin-de-siècle* that could easily be overlooked without Johnson bringing it to light.

Given the usefulness of *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* to students and professional musicians—it is, above all, an eminently *useful* book—I had hoped that the volume might serve as a distillation of recent Fauré scholarship for non-musicologists (performers and, to some extent, scholars in other disciplines). Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the book, then, is Johnson's lack of engagement with current scholarship on Fauré's songs. His source for all matters biographical is Jean-Michel Nectoux's *Gabriel Fauré: A Musical Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), with occasional references to Norman Suckling's largely outdated *Fauré* (London: Dent, 1946). Johnson seems resistant to updating these sources; curiously, the significantly revised edition of Nectoux's biography (2008) receives only one citation (perhaps because it has not yet been translated into English).

Johnson's choice of stylistic critics betrays the same (over)reliance on a few sources at the expense of more modern scholarship. In particular, he privileges the philosopher/musicologist Vladimir Jankélévitch's two books on Fauré—particularly *Fauré et ses mélodies* (Paris: Plon, 1938)—at the expense of more modern commentators.^[1] Despite Johnson's claim that the book "was, and remains, an inspiration" (xv), there are only a few fleeting references to Carlo Caballero's *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), which deals extensively with the composer's song cycles *La Bonne chanson* (1894), *La Chanson d'Ève* (1910) and *L'Horizon chimérique* (1921). Notably missing also are significant contributions to the study of Fauré's *melodies* by Nectoux, James William Sobaskie, and others.^[2]

The situation regarding the lives of the poets is worse, and scholars of French literature will no doubt be distressed by the lack of current references. In the nine pages of Chapter 8 devoted to Verlaine's biography until 1887 (189–97), for example, Johnson includes a single citation, to the translation of Verlaine's friend Edmond Lepelletier's biography of the poet *Paul Verlaine: His Life, his Work* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1909)—hardly the most reliable account. Other chapters betray a similar lack of modern criticism; when seeking a summary of Victor Hugo's poetic style (p. 33), Johnson turns to W.J. Robertson's *A Century of French Verse* (London: A.D. Innes, 1895).

For both the poets and Fauré himself, Johnson occasionally turns to something akin to “pop psychology” to explain biographical and artistic elements. In discussing the breakup of the composer's engagement to Marianne Viardot, for example, Johnson writes “It may be imagined that someone who had undergone an early separation from his mother would have reacted particularly badly to being sent away like this; he was almost certainly psychologically inclined to have taken this rejection to be a damaging reflection of his worth, and to have believed that Marianne's verdict was somehow deserved” (p. 104). This all-too-frequent type of sweeping generalization regarding Fauré's psyche stands in sharp contrast to the insightful observations found in Johnson's descriptions of the songs themselves.

This tendency also manifests itself in mapping elements from Fauré's biography directly onto his music, which Johnson himself notes is “dangerous”—immediately before he proceeds to do it anyway. For example, in regards to the the song “Madrigal” (1883), Johnson finds evidence of Fauré's marital dissatisfaction, citing “early signs that the composer missed his freedom, and that he sought to capture it, almost immediately” (p. 144). Similarly, the song songs “Larmes” (1888) is supposedly a reflection of Fauré being “tormented about the direction of his career, the state of his finances and a marriage in which he was unfulfilled” (p. 174). Hugely speculative observations of this nature may be the stuff of good program notes, but they are indeed “dangerous” when they have the potential to be taken as fact by readers (particularly students).

Despite its flaws, *Gabriel Fauré: The Songs and their Poets* will be of immense value to those who can benefit most from Johnson's vast experience in performing Fauré's music: singers and collaborative pianists, both student and professional. For a more scholarly audience, there is also much to be gleaned from Johnson's vast experience with the songs, provided you are willing to take his biographical analyses and lack of up-to-date scholarship with a grain of salt. Though this book falls short of being the definitive volume on Fauré's songs that it could have been, Johnson's observations on these musical gems are well worth reading to anyone interested in this music as a performer, listener, or scholar.

NOTES

[1] Jankélévitch's other book on Fauré is *De la musique au silence: Fauré et l'inexprimable* (Paris: Plon, 1974).

[2] See, for example, Jean-Michel Nectoux, “Voix, style, vocalité: Les premiers interprètes de Fauré,” in *D'un opéra l'autre: Hommage à Jean Mongrédien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996): 133–40; James William Sobaskie, “The Emergence of Gabriel Fauré's Late Musical Style and Technique,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 22/3 (2003): 223–75.

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