Trio pour piano, violon et violoncelle, op. 120, and: Quatuor À cordes, op. 121, and: La bonne chanson, op. 61 (review)

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Gabriel Fauré. La bonne chanson, op. 61. Édition révue et corrigée. Paris: J. Hamelle, 2010. [Pref. in Fre., Eng., Ger., Spa., p. iii–vi; song texts in Fre., p. vii–xii; score (84 p.) and 7 parts. ISMN-13/EAN 979020797436, pub. no. HA 9743. €89.60.]

Fauré’s two last works, the String Quartet, op. 121, and Piano Trio, op. 120, were composed between 1922 and 1924 and were left complete but unedited at his death. In these two elegant performing editions drawn from the Gabriel Fauré Œuvres complètes and produced by Bärenreiter, editor James William Sobaskie has done an admirable job of annotating the scores with articulation and expressive markings the composer would likely have included himself had he lived to do so. Sobaskie’s editing reveals the hallmarks of a scholar who knows Fauré’s work very well, as well as the ethos of composition for chamber music, particularly that for strings, of the time in which the works were composed.

In his introduction to the Piano Trio, Sobaskie situates it in its historical context, providing material from Fauré’s letters to support the idea that although the work was initially proposed by publisher Jacques Durand in 1922, it also arose “from an inner necessity” (p. iii): Fauré confessed to a fear of becoming bored without a compelling new project. The Piano Trio was just what he needed: once set on the task, Fauré completed the three-movement work in just a few months, and it was premiered at a private recital in April of 1923. The work was immediately popular, running to several reprints. Like much of the composer’s late works, it is highly lyrical, with long melodic lines stretched out over functional supporting harmonies.

This edition of the Piano Trio is based on “the numerous revisions or small additions made at the engraving stage preceding the first or second edition or preserved in the form of handwritten corrections in [Fauré’s] personal copies of his printed scores” (p. iv). This meticulous attention to detail and Bärenreiter’s desire to create playable, practical scores means that added or altered markings are indicated in the piano score by enclosure in brackets or by a small, unobtrusive slash through the marking (such as a slash through a slur) that is neither distracting nor difficult to understand as an editor’s annotation. The violin and cello parts do not have these indicia; players curious as to the editorial changes in the publication will want to consult the score. The score and parts are beautifully engraved, well-spaced to allow for players’ notes, and contain both measure numbers and rehearsal numbers. The violin and cello parts have useful cues, and the layout has been executed to make for easy page turns during rests. While not a work for
amateurs—the violin part contains octaves and some tricky chromaticism, the cello part is frequently set in the instrument’s upper register, and the pianist is called upon to perform some fairly intricate counterpoint—it is an essential piece for music libraries, particularly those serving communities with professional musicians or those in training.

Fauré’s String Quartet, op. 121, immediately followed the Piano Trio, and like the trio, is his only work for this particular ensemble. Like the trio, the quartet was suggested to Fauré by Durand, who thought that it would be as successful as the trio. Fauré, however, like other composers, felt the long shadow of Beethoven, and was apprehensive about the work, keeping its existence a secret until it was completed in a rough draft in September 1924, just a few weeks before the composer’s death. Fauré, fearing that he would not survive to fully edit the quartet, asked that Jean Roger-Ducasse “indicate the movements, nuances, and other indications” (p. v) that Fauré had not been able to include. Roger-Ducasse, unable to communicate with the composer before his death, made changes that went far beyond the “nuances” directed by the composer, including pitches and articulations such as slurring. Durand published both a manuscript facsimile of Fauré’s autograph score and Roger-Ducasse’s edition, creating a controversy over authorial intent in the work. This Bärenreiter edition uses the autograph manuscript and the composer’s letters and sketches to re-create a version presumably more like what Fauré hoped Roger-Ducasse would produce. As with the Piano Trio, the editorial indicia appear in the score only, and not in the performance parts.

The String Quartet is in three movements and is important in the repertoire not only because it is an excellent example of Fauré’s compositional approaches, but also because it clearly demonstrates the interaction of the major French composers of this period and knowledge of each other’s work. Fauré’s use of pizzicato in the quartet’s final movement is reminiscent of Ravel’s use of the same texture in his 1903 string quartet, while the practice of abruptly modulating at the end of the first and two-thirds through the third, while slightly more prepared than Debussy’s similar shifts, are not unalike. The work is about equal in technical difficulty to the Piano Trio, and the edition just as well produced, rendering it a solid choice for the performer looking for some degree of historical input.

Fauré’s song cycle La bonne chanson, consisting of nine poems by Paul Verlaine (1844–1896) and initially set for soprano and piano, has a somewhat complicated publication and performance history. The work was composed between 1892 and 1894 for Fauré’s mistress, soprano Emma Bardac. The order of the songs, rearranged from Verlaine’s order of poems, creates a narrative both textual and tonal. In 1898 Fauré revised the work, adding strings (two violins, viola, cello, and bass) to the existing piano and voice, and transposing the first song from A♭ major to B♭ major, and the second song from G major to A major. The publisher of these editions, as well as the one under review here, Hamelle, then transposed the entire work for “medium” voice and piano, lowering the keys of the songs by anywhere between a step to a minor third. Later, Hamelle prepared an edition for voice, piano, and strings that further lowered the keys of the second and seventh songs. The repeated attempts to rearrange this work for various voice types should be a more recent decision, as the cycle was considered a failure at the time of its publication. Perhaps hoping to find admirers among those for whom less repertoire existed, however, Hamelle published the variously transposed songs during Fauré’s lifetime. The present edition, published in 2010, is for medium voice with piano and strings in the same keys as the transcription for medium voice and piano, without the additional transposition of songs two and seven (an edition for voix élevée in the original keys is also available from the publisher—Ed.). In addition to the score and parts for the strings, it also includes the high voice and piano edition of songs one and two “in order to help performers with preparatory work” (p. vi), whatever that may be. A somewhat confusing table at the beginning of the score shows the tonalities of the various editions of the work.

The edition does not purport to be scholarly, and is apparently intended for the French market. A brief uncredited
preface—which coyly hints at Fauré’s relationship with Bardac and her subsequent divorce from her husband and marriage to Claude Debussy—contains no citations for the anecdotes it presents about the work, and no explanation for Fauré’s decision to reconstruct La bonne chanson for piano and strings other than to suggest that it was “Perhaps to highlight [the] harmonic variety more effectively” (p. vi). While the preface is translated from French into English, German, and Spanish for the volume, the song texts are not; nor is there any discussion of the narrative they create in Fauré’s reordered sequence. There is no indication as to who might have edited the work or added or removed annotations aside from the composer, but the full score is certainly usable, containing measure numbers and rehearsal letters. There is the strange inclusion of a piano part for the piano and strings version that contains the piano and vocal lines only, omitting the string parts except for the occasional cue. How this would be used by a pianist is unclear; probably one would use the full score. The other instrumental parts also contain the entire vocal line above the staff. While cues can certainly be useful, the inclusion of the entire vocal line in this edition is distracting more than helpful, particularly as the songs are not rhythmically or otherwise complicated. Additionally, tempo markings are placed only above the vocal line, requiring the player to look back and forth almost continuously from the instrumental to the vocal line and assimilate the information gathered from both. That said, the parts are clear and fairly easy to read, although the vocal line and its attendant dynamic and articulation marks above each staff does limit the space for players to put in their own markings. The work itself is a complex one and demanding for the singer, although the instrumental parts are not technically difficult, perhaps due to their role as support. In the meantime, we await the appearance in the Fauré Œuvres complètes now underway the volume that will provide a truly corrected and critical edition of one of the composer’s most important and often performed works.

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