

and Eisler. Levitt admits in an essay titled "Listeners Beware" that she actually didn't care for these songs when she first heard them, but found them to be chilling and strange. It's fortunate for us that she was willing to give them a second and third listen and came to understand and appreciate their greatness and importance. May we experience a similar journey of discovery.

Gabriel Fauré: Songs for Bass Voice and Piano. Jared Schwartz, bass; Roy Howat, piano. (Toccata Classics TOCC 0268; 59:34)

[*Three Baudelaire Settings*]: "Hymne," "La rançon," "Chant d'automne." [*Two Tuscan Settings*]: "Sérénade toscane," "Après un rêve"; *Two Gautier Settings*: "Les matelots," "Chanson du Pêcheur;" [*Three Verlaine Settings*]: "Mandoline," "En sourdine," "Prison"; "Tristesse," "L'absent," "La parfum impérissable," "Dans la forêt de septembre," "Tristesse d'Olympio," "Aurore," "La fleur qui va sur l'eau," "Fleur jetée," "Le don silencieux," "Nocturne," "Les présents," "Au bord de l'eau," "Ici-bas," "Barcarolle," "Le voyageur."

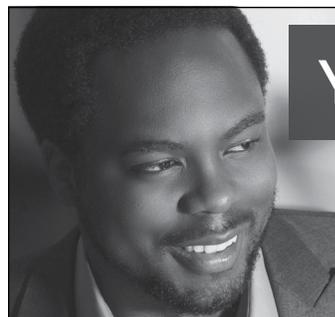
Most of us tend to associate the *mélodies* of French composer Gabriel Fauré with the pastel shades of Elly Ameling, Maggie Teyte, and other singers with light, gentle voices. To do so, however, is to misunderstand what these extraordinary songs have to offer us. That is the contention of Mary Dibbern, the artistic director of this recording, who is also a highly admired vocal coach and current music director of the Dallas Opera. As she explains in the liner notes, she can trace her own artistic lineage back

to Fauré himself. One of her primary mentors in collaborative piano, Paul Vellucci, was himself privileged to be mentored by the legendary Nadia Boulanger, who was one of Fauré's most noteworthy students. It was through her work with Vellucci—as well as her collaborations with Gérard Souzay—that Dibbern came to a new appreciation and understanding of the rich legacy left by Fauré in his more than 100 songs.

But Dibbern is careful to acknowledge that this release would not have been possible without the contribution of pianist Roy Howat, a formidable *mélodie* expert in his own right and the co-editor (with his wife, Emily Kilpatrick) of the new Peters edition of Fauré's complete songs, which they are billing as the first critical edition of these songs ever done. These songs have undergone what amounts to a remastering in which various errors (both big and small) have been corrected and the original wishes of the composer more faithfully realized. In some cases, the songs have also had

their numeration adjusted to more closely reflect their actual date of composition as well as Fauré's intentions for grouping these songs.

Many of the songs contained herein have also been transposed into lower keys than those most commonly encountered in the standard published collection. In this age of websites like musicnotes.com, in which songs are available in seven different keys with the ease of a couple of keystrokes, it is easy to assume that transposing songs is a relatively uncomplicated matter. In fact, an ill-conceived transposition can dramatically undermine the impact of a given song in ways that would surely horrify the composer. This is why certain composers like Gerald Finzi had their songs published in only one key, and other composers carefully limited such transpositions. The alteration of keys for this release was done in careful collaboration between Dibbern, Howat, and bass Jared Schwartz, who painstakingly weighed how each potential key would work both for the singer's melodic line as



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well as for the integrity of the piano accompaniment. Special care was taken that lower transpositions would not result in a muddying of the texture, which surely resulted in some carefully brokered compromises. A few songs here, such as the light-hearted “Mandoline,” are rendered in the standard low key. Other songs like “Après un rêve” are adjusted one half or whole step lower than the most commonly encountered low key, which yields a dramatic if not drastic change in the song’s essential cast. There are also a number of songs that have been decidedly lowered as much as a third, including the hauntingly beautiful “Au bord de l’eau.” It is those songs which have been most significantly lowered that tend to yield the most beautiful and compelling performances here. Schwartz’s voice is always attractive but rather generically so in the middle and upper registers; in the lower range, his voice attains its richest and most distinctive beauty.

There is far more to Schwartz’s singing than mere lovely sound. He is also unafraid of engaging with these songs in the most expressive manner possible. One of the most impressive examples of that is in “Tristesse,” which features a text by Théophile Gautier. It describes the stark desolation of a heartbroken man surrounded by revelers and various signs of springtime that only heighten his own sense of despair and gloom. There is a highly charged theatricality to Schwartz’s singing here that calls to mind some of the finest performances of Edith Piaf and other highly expressive singers of her ilk. The approach feels poles apart from the balanced nuance of more typical art song performances, but the effect is electrifying. His command of French diction is impeccable and he breathes expressive life into all of

these texts. Moreover, he manages to negotiate even the most intricate melodic flourishes with a grace that one does not always associate with lower, burlier voices.

Fauré’s piano accompaniments are thought to be somewhat simpler than those found in the *mélodies* of Debussy and other impressionists, but they are often much more challenging than they appear to be. Roy Howat has the technical mastery to mask those difficulties as he surmounts them, and it is that astonishing sense of effortlessness with which he plays that allows him to so richly enhance the beauty of these songs. Moreover, he and Schwartz achieve flawless synchronicity in even the most complex of these songs, which is no small feat when the rhythmic palette is so varied and fluid. It is readily apparent that the singer and pianist have spent a tremendous amount of time together with this music; this kind of musical perfection is achieved no other way.

One of the most commendable aspects of this release is that it includes a mixture of familiar favorites and intriguing rarities. Schwartz tells us in his essay that the project’s artistic director presented him with a lengthy list of potential songs, but it was up to him—in consultation with Howat—to make the ultimate choices. This array of songs offers up an engrossing celebration of all that made Fauré such an important and effective composer of songs, from the delicate and familiar loveliness of “Ici-bas” to the unsettling darkness of an obscure gem like “La rançon.” One especially interesting inclusion here is of two songs that were published with both French and Tuscan texts. Few people will know “O tu che dormi” (or “Sérénade toscane” as it was titled in French), but its com-

panion piece, “Levati, sol,” is actually one of Fauré’s most beloved masterworks, “Après un rêve.” These pieces have never been recorded in Tuscan until now, and it is a wonderful treat to have them here. Howat’s lengthy essay includes insightful comments on all 25 songs, as well as an explanation of how they have been grouped for this recording. (By and large, the groupings are not Fauré’s own.) He also discusses Fauré’s Mediterranean background and how vital this is to fully grasping his music and its essential passion.

This recording serves a very important purpose by awakening in us a deeper appreciation for all that Fauré accomplished in his songs. Moreover, it also helps to expand our notion of what kind of voices can successfully traverse these pieces. What could be more exciting than having our horizons broadened in this way, especially when it regards a composer whom we don’t actually understand as thoroughly as we thought we did? One can only hope that this is just the beginning of a thorough exploration of all of the songs that could conceivably be sung by low bass.

Full texts and translations are included.

A new bloom
frilly and pink
between the rich and green
grafted and grown by your
hands
warmed in the sun
given to me
gone but remembered
preserved in resin,
and memory

Raymond A. Foss, “April Violet”