

Analysis of the Creative Styles of Gabriel Fauré's Art Songs in Different Periods

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Abstract: The rise of French art songs mainly occurred from the middle of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, and its roots can be traced back to the French musical form of "Romance". This kind of song is renowned for its restrained, refined, and elegant musical style, demonstrating the profound cultural heritage of the French nation and the unique characteristics of salon culture. At the same time, it has a close connection with literary works. In this field, Fauré is an outstanding representative. His musical creative career lasted for sixty-five years, during which he composed more than a hundred art songs. Fauré's lofty status in the history of French music is closely related to his art song compositions. This article aims to sort out the development process of French art songs, briefly introduce Fauré's life, and deeply explore the characteristics of his art song creation in three stages, so as to summarize the characteristics of his art songs in different stages.

Keywords: Fauré; French art songs; Style characteristics

1. Introduction

Gabriel Urbain Fauré, a pivotal figure in the history of French music, created art songs that spanned the entire evolution of French music from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Fauré inherited the classical music tradition and influenced the development of impressionist and modern music. His works reflect the characteristics of French music, with smooth melodies, exquisite and delicate expressions, and simple and symmetrical structures. From the early romantic style to the mid-term exploration of symbolism and then to the in-depth study of impressionism in the late period, Fauré's art song creation process can be divided into three stages, each of which has made indelible contributions to the development of French art songs. His works were not only widely popular at that time but are still frequently performed in concerts today, becoming part of the classic repertoire. Fauré's art song creation has undoubtedly added a brilliant chapter to the musical treasure trove of France and even the world.

2. A Brief Introduction to the Development of French Art Songs

The academic field of music typically traces the origin of French art songs to the musical genre of "Romance." As a new literary form, Romance was born in France in the second half of the 18th century and was defined as a kind of poem that narrates ancient stories with a brisk rhythm in the 1718 edition of the Dictionary of the French Academy. However, in the early 19th century, the works of the romance genre began to decline. At the same time, a new musical genre, "French art songs," began to rise. It enjoys the same fame as the German art song "Lied" and holds a significant place in the history of world music, both of which fall under the category of art songs. French art songs are also known as "Chanson" or "Mélodie," which are unique names given by the French. In the academic field, it is generally believed that Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) founded French art songs. He named some of his songs "Mélodie," and this term is intended to emphasize their beautiful melodies, thus distinguishing them from French art songs (Chanson), German art songs (Lied), and early Romances. Most scholars regard Berlioz's approach as the real starting point for the development of French art songs. Later, inspired and influenced by the French bourgeois revolution and ideological and cultural movements, composers such as Charles Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) and Jules Massenet (1842-1912) combined art songs with the aesthetic standards of the upper class, thus developing art songs with distinct French characteristics. In the second half of the 19th century, composers such as Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) and Claude Debussy (1862-1918) became representative French composers of this period. Their creative styles had a profound impact on later French art songs. Fauré had a particularly significant influence on the younger generation of composers because he served as the president of the Paris Conservatory of Music for more than 20 years. Fauré's

creative style closely influences the formation of the impressionist style of French art songs. At the beginning of the 20th century, emerging composers such as Reynaldo Hahn (1874-1947) and Albert Roussel (1869-1937) reflected the progressiveness of the era in their works and made positive contributions to the continuous development of French art songs. In the late 20th century, composers such as Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992) and Yves Daniel-Lesur (1908-2002) created a large number of modern art songs with French characteristics.

3. A Brief Introduction to Fauré's Life

The renowned French composer, organist, pianist, and music educator Gabriel Urbain Fauré (1845-1924) had a career that almost spanned the history of the development of French music from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century. He was born in Pamiers. His father was the principal of a local school, and from a young age, he showed a strong interest in music, especially in organ playing. At the age of 9, in 1854, Fauré entered the Niedermeyer Music School in Paris and began an eleven-year music study.^[1] Under the guidance of the school's founder, Louis Niedermeyer, Fauré learned the musical traditions of the classical period, including the scales and modes of medieval church music, as well as famous works by Bach, which were not even commonly seen in the classrooms of the Paris Conservatory of Music at that time. After Niedermeyer's death, Charles Saint-Saëns became Fauré's teacher and lifelong friend. He injected new vitality into the school and introduced the works of contemporary composers such as Schumann, Liszt, Gounod, Berlioz, and Wagner. During this period, Fauré particularly admired Chopin, which influenced his later piano compositions. In 1865, Fauré graduated with excellent grades and won several first prizes in piano, organ, harmony, fugue and counterpoint, and composition. The following year, he served as an organist at the Rennes Church and also began his creative music career. Since 1870, Fauré served as an organist and chorus conductor at Notre-Dame de Paris and other places. He started teaching composition at the Paris Conservatory of Music in 1896. He was elected conservatory president in 1905. He joined the Academy of Arts as an academicien in 1909, and he formally retired in 1920.^[2] In the history of French music, Fauré is a key figure connecting the 19th and 20th centuries. He inherited the traditions of Saint-Saëns and influenced later composers such as Ravel and Debussy. In the early stage, he jointly laid the foundation for the French national music school with Saint-Saëns. In the later stage, he promoted reforms at the Paris Conservatory of Music and trained younger generations, playing a crucial role in the development of modern French music. Fauré not only laid the foundation for modern French music ahead of Debussy but also made significant contributions in the field of art songs. His works reflect the characteristics of French music, with smooth melodies, exquisite and delicate music, and simple and symmetrical structures, winning widespread praise and love. Not only were these works popular at the time, but they continue to receive frequent performances in concerts today, thereby becoming a part of the classic repertoire.

4. The Three Creative Periods of Fauré's Art Songs

Fauré's art song creation began with his first art song, *Le papillon et la fleur*, Op.1 (The Butterfly and the Flower, Op.1) in 1861 and ended with his last vocal cycle, *L'Horizon chimérique*, Op.118 (The Chimerical Horizon, Op.118) in 1921. Over the course of his 60-year creative career, Fauré composed approximately 108 art songs, of which approximately 60 saw public publication.

Fauré was a composer active in the period of transition from the late romantic era to modern times. His art song creation not only inherited the characteristics of early French art song composers such as Gounod and Bizet but also influenced later composers such as Debussy and Ravel. We can divide Fauré's art song works into three periods based on the changes in their musical characteristics. Based on the year of composition, they can be divided into the early period (1861-1886), the middle period (1887-1906), and the late period (1906-1921).

4.1. Early Period (1861-1886)

The period from 1861 to 1886 was the early period of Fauré's art song creation. The environment, life, study, and work during Fauré's creative period shape his creative characteristics. Specifically, Fauré's early creation occurred during his studies at the Ecole Niedermeyer. The school principal, Niedermeyer, and Saint-Saëns influenced the creative style of Fauré's art songs during this period.

The melodies and harmonies of Fauré's early art song works were basic and pure, and he incorporated the formal beauty of German art songs and the lyricism of Italian art songs. Often, the musical form

followed a strophic structure, dominated by vocal melodies. The piano part usually appeared in the form of accompaniment.

It is worth noting that the seeds of Fauré's personalized musical vocabulary began to emerge during this period. In *Mandoline, Op. 58 No. 1*, the composer broke through the traditional rhythmic pattern and used 5/8 time to simulate the swaying rhythm of the mandolin plucking. In *Green, Op. 58 No. 3*, the combination of the sustained tone and the chromatic melody foreshadowed the harmonic experiments in his middle-period creations. Although these innovative techniques did not completely break through the framework of romanticism, they laid the groundwork for the subsequent style transformation.

During this period, most of the poems selected by Fauré were from the works of French romantic poets, but the poems of the five poets of the "Parnassian School" also accounted for a large proportion. These poets included Théophile Gautier (1811-1872), Armand Silvestre (1838-1901), Sully Prudhomme (1839-1907), and Charles Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894).

Fauré's representative works during this period included *Lydia, Op. 4-2 (1865)*, composed based on the poem by the romantic poet Leconte de Lisle; *L'Absent, Op. 5-3 (1865)*, composed based on the poem by Victor Hugo; the vocal cycle *Poème D'un jour, Op. 21 (1881)* (A Poem of One Day, Op. 21 (1881)), composed based on the poem by Charles Grand mougine; and 39 other art songs.

4.2. Middle Period (1887-1906)

The middle period of Fauré's art song creation was from 1878 to 1906, and most of Fauré's art songs were created from approximately Op. 46 to Op. 92. During this period, French poetry and literature also underwent significant changes. In contrast to the strict format and objective formal concepts of the "Parnassian School," the "Symbolist" style emerged, which advocated expressing the inner feelings of writers in a vague and symbolic way.

Against this cultural background, Fauré also developed a strong interest in the works of symbolist poets. Therefore, Fauré's encounter and acquaintance with Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), one of the founders of symbolist poetry and literature, became the most important event in his creative period.

During this period, to express the hazy and dreamy atmosphere in symbolist poetry, Fauré also tried his best to restrain the direct and strong expression of emotions in his music creation.^[3] In terms of the creative style and characteristics of art songs, different from the first period, the status of the piano melody part was significantly enhanced, and it had already broken away from the role of merely accompanying the vocal melody part. The ternary form basically became the main creative form during this period. In terms of harmony and mode, a large number of chromatic progressions and altered chords were used, and multiple modes were fully applied, greatly increasing the complex harmonic vocabulary. Fauré had fully developed his unique personal creative style.

The vocal cycle *La Bonne Chanson, Op. 61 (1894)*, which was conceived based on the poetry collection of the symbolist poet Paul Verlaine and combined with Fauré's own emotional experience, was the most important and successful masterpiece of Fauré during this period. The entire vocal cycle consists of 9 songs. Fauré created it out of a sense of security and happiness in love, following his meeting with his beloved, Emma Bardac. The melody and lyrics of each song are perfectly integrated, and the piano part is especially well illustrated. It can be said that *La Bonne Chanson, Op. 61 (1894)*, reached the peak of Fauré's art song creation in terms of the deep connotation, techniques, creativity, and changes of the work.

To match the obscure and hazy images in Verlaine's *La Bonne Chanson*, Fauré created a new creative concept of "la mélodie suivant le verbe" (the melody following the word). In the third song of the cycle, *La lune blanche, Op. 61 No. 3*, the vocal melody unfolds completely according to the cadence of the French language. The chromatic melody line forms a highly unified artistic expression with the metaphorical nature of the verses. This innovation that breaks through the traditional melody construction rules directly influenced Debussy's creative concept of *Five Poems of Baudelaire*.

In addition, art songs such as *Spleen, Op. 51-3 (1880)* and the vocal cycle *Cinq Mélodies de Venise Op. 58 (1891)* (Five Venetian Melodies, Op. 58 (1891)) are also excellent works of this period.

4.3. Late Period (1907-1921)

The late period of Fauré's art song creation was from 1906 to 1922. Fauré's art songs from this period were less famous than those from the early and middle periods, and he was less productive. On the one

hand, because he served as the president of the Paris Conservatory of Music during this period and devoted a lot of energy to the development and teaching of the conservatory. On the other hand, because Fauré's physical condition was not very good during this period. Just like Beethoven, Fauré's hearing was severely impaired, and he was close to deafness in the late stage of his career. Despite this, Fauré still completed four important vocal cycles with a strong will, namely *La Chanson d'Eve*, Op.95 (The Song of Eve, Op.95), *Le Jardin clos*, Op.106 (The Enclosed Garden, Op.106), *Mirages*, Op.113 (The Mirage, Op.113), and *L'Horizon chimérique*, Op.118 (The Chimerical Horizon, Op.118).

During this period, the vocal melody part of Fauré's art songs often presented a sparse structure. Fauré combined the lyrics with the subtly changing piano harmonies, rather than directly interpreting the lyrics with the melody. Later generations often comment on this, seeing it as closer to the form of a ballad. The piano part often appears in the form of a repeated pattern. Even if this pattern has various changes, the whole piece still has a subtle sense of unity. Further creating an atmosphere suitable for the poetry through the piano part is a common feature of Fauré's later art song works. Such a creative style, where the piano accompaniment melody actively creates the atmosphere and emotions of the song, also influenced Debussy's later "impressionist" style of music creation.

In his late creative career, Fauré's representative work was the vocal cycle *L'Horizon chimérique* (The Chimerical Horizon), completed in 1921, which was also his last work in art song creation. When creating this cycle, Fauré was already 77 years old, and his hearing was almost completely lost. During this period, Fauré's composition skills had reached perfection, and many of his works fully demonstrated his exquisite composition techniques. For example, *L'Horizon chimérique* (The Chimerical Horizon), a vocal cycle with a simple and clear structure and smooth melody, delivers unexpected, delicate, and fantasy-filled musical enjoyment to the audience. The cycle contains four songs, and the lyrics are taken from the poetry collection *L'Horizon chimérique* (The Chimerical Horizon) by the French poet Jean de la Ville de Mirmont (1886-1914), which was published in 1920.

5. Conclusion

Through the in-depth analysis of the three writing periods of the Lei artistic songs, it can be seen that the style evolution track clearly presents the historical process of the transformation of French music from romanticism to modernism. In the early works, innovative factors were bred in the classical framework; in the middle stage, the poetic transformation of symbolist music was realized through the harmony revolution; and in the later period, the ultimate refinement of personal style was completed in the wave of impressionism. This artistic exploration, lasting 60 years, not only makes Frere a hub in the development history of French artistic songs but also builds a musical bridge connecting the 19th-century tradition and the innovation of the 20th century. His works still profoundly echo in the field of artistic song creation through the deep exploration of poetic artistic conception, pioneering experiments with harmony colors, and concise remodeling of musical form.

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