

# Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics

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## 1 The question of sincerity

This chapter examines the role sincerity played in the creation, criticism, and social production of French music at the beginning of the twentieth century. Between 1890 and 1930, references to sincerity pervaded French writings on music as constantly as ideas about decadence, impressionism, or the conflicting currents of the classical and the modern. But in contrast to these categories, which have not only endured in more recent writing on music but also taken on new meanings, the question of sincerity has vanished from sight. It is an idea that belongs less characteristically to the domain of art than to ordinary moral behavior, and probably for this very reason studies of music have disregarded it. Yet the idea of sincerity has a definite history, a real aesthetic presence, specifically French, whose telling opens up new perspectives on a crucial phase in the history of music. Fauré becomes a central figure in this discussion because no composer more than he and no music more than his were hailed as sincere in France during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

Émile Littré, in the supreme French lexicon of the period, defined a sincere person as one who expresses truthfully what he feels or thinks. Littré also admitted the application of the word to things as well as people.<sup>1</sup> When Fauré's contemporaries called a musical work sincere, they meant, in short, that it expressed truthfully what its composer felt or thought. It would be easy to object at once that sincerity is not an aesthetic value but a moral one. In fact I do not wish to argue that sincerity can confer greatness on a work of art; it is not my intention here to defend any aesthetic theory. Rather, I offer the history of an idea and an understanding of its function in an aesthetic system that existed in the past. Within this system, the free intercourse of moral and aesthetic values was firmly entrenched; therefore, to insist on separating them would play the evidence false from a historical point of view. If we wish to understand how Fauré and his critics viewed the composer's artistic calling, we must provisionally set aside our prejudices, however valid, against so fragile a category as "sincerity."

Fauré's ideas form the starting point of the following account. But Fauré entrusted his most deeply held beliefs to the page only rarely and fleetingly; he preferred, it seems, to reserve such avowals for intimate conversation among friends or an inspired word of advice to a promising student. Fauré's reticence forces us to rely on those friends and loyal students, privileged

witnesses, for many details and explanations. Charles Kœchlin and Émile Vuillermoz, among his pupils, and André Messager, Henri Duparc and Paul Dukas, close colleagues, all provide precious testimony, appraising sincerity both as a general phenomenon and as a quality eminently characteristic of Fauré's work. Moreover, by occasionally moving beyond this inner circle of witnesses to weigh the opinions of a Debussy, a Proust, a Bergson, we will come to see the broader horizon of this idea in French music and letters of the early twentieth century.

## 1 The composer's sincerity

While Fauré was working on his First Piano Quintet in 1903, he wrote a letter to his wife thanking her for encouraging his undertaking. "You're right to value [chamber music] as much as you do. Indeed, in it, as in symphonic music, you'll find real music and the sincerest translation of a personality."<sup>2</sup> Here Fauré links together three terms at the heart of our inquiry: sincerity itself, the act of translation, and the artist's personality. The translation of personality, or a personal sensibility, is the fundamental meaning of sincerity in composition. More precisely, musical sincerity is the translation of the artist's inner life into music by force of innate creative necessities. This definition arrives before the argument and all the historical nuances that will support it but states a working thesis. We should also take up the meaning of a fourth term, sensibility, which in the French of Fauré's time designated a "quality of feeling," feeling being generally distinguished from, though not exclusive of, the operations of mind or intelligence. In artistic production, sensibility signified the maker's ability to reproduce a unique, individual quality of feeling in the finished work.<sup>3</sup> We find Fauré using the word in this sense in a preface he wrote in 1916. There Fauré asks, rhetorically, "Isn't every artist free to translate his thought, his sensibility, by the means it pleases him to choose?"<sup>4</sup>

We should notice, in both of these short quotations by Fauré, the recurrence of the idea of "translation." Fauré used this verb repeatedly in his meditations on art, as did countless other composers and critics in early twentieth-century France. The notion of translation is important because it captures the movement from the realm of individual experience (the composer as human being) to the realm of public representation (the work of art). Sincerity, as an aesthetic and ethical value, entails an intimate correspondence between the composer – or more precisely, the real, historical human being – and his music. We equate the composer with the man rather than issuing grounds for distinguishing them, because this identification is one of the fundamental premises of artistic sincerity. When Fauré's critics

call his music sincere, they affirm an ideal harmony between his music and his personality. The specific qualities of this personality are usually described as revealing a particular “sensitivity.” Thus Charles Kœchlin could assert that “beautiful works are those that . . . best translate the beautiful sensitivity of their creator, or, if you prefer, those that give the whole measure of his personal character.”<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Kœchlin evoked the reflection of Fauré’s personal character in his creative work. He makes this premise explicit: “It is always the man that we find in the works of an artist: we benefit or suffer from the good or bad qualities of his inner being.”<sup>6</sup> These observations may strike some as simple-minded. Yet Paul Dukas, the most erudite French composer of his generation and an inveterate skeptic, did not hesitate to follow the same line of thought. Kœchlin’s ostensibly naïve considerations find unequivocal support in an essay Dukas wrote a few weeks after Fauré’s death. Dukas places remarkable emphasis on Fauré’s personal character:

In every beautiful work, it is the man the work expresses that counts first and foremost.

In this, what more luminous example to follow?

Those who had the joy of sharing Fauré’s intimacy know how faithfully his art reflected his being – to the extent that his music at times would seem to them the harmonious transfiguration of his own exquisite charm. Others did their utmost to rise above themselves or, if they collaborated with a poet, to surpass that collaborator. Fauré, with a unique grace, without constraint, gathers every external impression back into his inner harmony. Poems, landscapes, sensations that arise from the spur of the moment or the fleeting wave of memories – whatever sources his music springs from, it translates above all his own self according to the varied moods of the most admirable sensitivity.<sup>7</sup>

The irresistible presence of Fauré’s artistic personality in this passage signifies something beyond the conventions of a eulogy. Dukas, without using the word “sincerity,” here elaborates his understanding of how a composer channels various “external impressions” and personal sensations through a unique quality of feeling, “sensitivity,” so that every source of inspiration returns to a single origin, the self, ultimately translated into music.

However, Dukas’s description of this almost magical transmission immediately raises an important question. His allusion to poems and “external impressions” does not fully explain how a composer can remain “himself” when setting a poet’s texts – the work of another mind – to music. By what grace does Fauré “gather every external impression back into his inner harmony”? We must pause to see how the proponents of sincerity

responded to this problem, for if the composer of a song or opera speaks not in his own voice but through the mouth of another, then the whole concept of musical sincerity would suffer a drastic narrowing. We would find it difficult to talk about the “sincerity” of anything but “pure” or “absolute” music, which ostensibly conserves a singleness of voice. It was Kœchlin who took up what Dukas left unspoken and most explicitly addressed the question of sincerity in collaborative works of art. Kœchlin acknowledged that a partnership between a poet and a misguided composer – one who turns away from the real nature of his gifts (or, as Dukas said, willfully attempts to surpass his collaborator) – will very probably result in an inauthentic work. But collaboration in itself need not bring about a betrayal of a composer’s inner voices. For Fauré in particular, Kœchlin claimed the widest possible domain for sincerity in his work, collaborative or otherwise. “What is peculiarly Fauré’s is an absolute penetration of things and beings; we would not say that his music adapts itself to its subject, but rather that it constitutes the essence of it; a magic mirror, his music becomes the subject itself. A unique gift, to make the poets’ thought live again; an inexplicable mystery, never to lose, for all that, his exceedingly recognizable personality.”<sup>8</sup> This assertion itself looms as something of an inexplicable mystery, for Kœchlin maintains, in effect, that a composer’s thought can become the object it contemplates. It might be tempting to dismiss such reflections as beyond the pale. Yet they embody assumptions representative of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century thought, and challenges to these assumptions by contemporary composers, critics, or aestheticians are rare. Cultural critics today are in a position to see that Fauré’s musical culture essentialized sincerity. We shall see, with the work of Wilde and Valéry, a few direct intellectual attacks on the notion of an “essential self” which come close to undoing the whole ideological structure. As for Kœchlin’s conclusions, in their historical context they are exceptional only in their bluntness, their explicit delineation of received ideas about creativity and originality. Why musicians went to such lengths to retain the prerogatives of sincerity and personal utterance will become apparent as we begin to see what was at stake.

These idealizations of sincerity obviously reflect a fundamental belief that musical expression answers its highest spiritual calling when it conveys the experience of a single subjectivity. From this belief follows a constant emphasis on the composer’s “oneness of being,” on his unique “inner self.” For an example of this concern, we may call upon a short essay by the critic Gaston Carraud, whose observations on Fauré’s personal style distinctly foreshadow what Kœchlin wrote about sincerity and collaborative works over a decade later. Carraud remarks how Fauré’s style changes as he turns

from one poet to another, and Carraud points out the variety of media and genres found in Fauré's work, but what matters most to this critic is that in everything the composer does, he "remains so constantly himself." "It is the manner of speaking that changes, not the spirit, which keeps a consistency such as one rarely sees in a body of work so diverse."<sup>9</sup> Dukas, of course, said much the same thing when he praised Fauré for always "translating himself" and filtering the different sources of his inspiration through his own sensibility.

To maintain a singleness of voice amid such variables as poetic inspiration, genres, forms, and the passage of time may be difficult for even a great composer, but at least the first three of these variables normally remain matters of personal choice. By the end of the nineteenth century, other contingencies posed hindrances to the expression of a unique subjectivity. Diverse stylistic trends, whose fluctuations remained beyond any individual artist's control, and the simultaneous attraction of a few outstanding artistic figures, made the quest to reveal a single sincere inner self in music ever more difficult. Even the luminaries themselves, Fauré and Debussy among them, felt the potential vulnerability of their status as independent and original creators. Early in 1911, in the course of an interview, Debussy spoke passionately on this topic, and his slightly defensive tone reveals a certain apprehension over his artistic independence: "Do not think that . . . I wish to position myself as the leader of a school or as a reformer! I simply try to express as sincerely as I can the sensations and sentiments I experience. The rest scarcely matters to me!"<sup>10</sup> Debussy brooded over the ongoing challenge of "remaining oneself," for he, like the imitators who rallied around his music in spite of all his protests, had faced parallel difficulties in his changing responses to Wagner's style. Self-critical in his own art, Debussy was quick to observe a lack of self-reliance in the music of others. In his critique of Georges Witkowski's First Symphony, for example, he rued the composer's excessive compliance with precepts Vincent d'Indy was then instilling in the students of the Schola Cantorum: "[Witkowski] heeds voices whose authority is redoubtable, and these, it seems to me, prevent him from hearing a more personal voice."<sup>11</sup>

A composer who consistently heard his "personal voice" through the din of contemporary trends, celebrities, and polemics would naturally attract attention. In his stylistic autonomy, Fauré stood out in this tumultuous early twentieth-century context. When the leading Belgian critic Octave Maus attended the first Parisian performances of *Pénélope* in 1913, he intentionally led off his review with praise for Fauré's independence and "the individual character [particularisme] of a completely personal accent," which Maus declared to cherish before anything else in the work. "We can only



rejoice in [this] example . . . at a time when the art of music is tossed among so many different currents that it is in danger of being turned adrift.”<sup>12</sup> Carraud thought that Fauré was able to preserve this “personal accent” because he “escaped, almost inadvertently, all the imperious influences that contested one another at the end of the last century.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the minds of his contemporaries, Fauré’s indifference to stylistic vogues was one aspect of his sincerity.

In 1904 Paul Landormy conducted a series of interviews with composers and academicians on “The Present State of French Music.” Unfortunately, Fauré was not one of the respondents. However, Henri Duparc’s extensive response touches our inquiry directly, for in it he renders explicit the opposition between a sincere self on the one hand and various forces construed as external to this self on the other. We shall see that he and Fauré seemed to share kindred views of self-expression and sincerity in music:

For me, the musician speaks his own language in writing music and should not concern himself with anything but expressing his soul’s emotions to other souls; music that is not the gift of oneself is nothing. In other words, the musician who, as he writes a work, worries about belonging to such and such a school – he may be a skillful craftsman, but he’s no more than that . . . There are certain works that have no need to be either archaic or modern, because they are beautiful and sincere.<sup>14</sup>

A historical understanding of sincerity in French music hinges on this distinction between true self-expression, which may reveal itself by any style, and the superficial expressions of a scattered, externally affiliated consciousness. Indeed, Duparc clearly implies that sincerity, as a factor in artistic activity, outstrips all matters of mere style, which are subordinated to it. Once a style, be it modern or traditional, becomes identified with a clique, an institution, or the compositional model of a leading creative figure, it can become an obstacle to sincerity. Imitators and disciples, in their zeal to embrace a ready-made solution or adhere to a dogma, run the risk of betraying their own personalities; in scuttling their souls’ own emotions, they resemble those unnamed composers Dukas opposed to Fauré and described as striving to “rise above themselves” rather than attending to their own “inner harmonies.” To convey “the deep sincerity of Fauré’s art,” meant, therefore, invoking his autonomy as an artist: “belonging to no school, he has no dogma but the search for beauty.”<sup>15</sup>

The testimony of Fauré’s contemporaries affords us a clear view of his identity as a “sincere artist,” and Fauré’s brief comment to his wife about the “translation of a personality” fits into the general conception of artistic sincerity I have tried to reconstruct from these more detailed accounts.

However, in order to enrich this image we should like to know better how Fauré himself understood sincerity in music. From his pen – so reluctant to theorize – we have only one description of sincerity more elaborate than the one that began this section. But we also have the evidence of his teaching, to which this other document is tied.

Fauré took over Massenet's class in composition at the Conservatoire upon the latter's resignation in 1896. At various times between 1896 and 1905, Fauré could count Ravel, Florent Schmitt, Nadia Boulanger, Émile Vuillermoz, Georges Enesco, Charles Kœchlin, Jean Roger-Ducasse, Alfredo Casella, and Louis Aubert among his students. By all accounts, Fauré seems to have instilled in them an uncompromising loyalty to their own individual tendencies. In an interview with Jean-Michel Nectoux, Boulanger conveyed the special quality of Fauré's teaching, which she considered from an almost ethical point of view:

Liberal, to be sure, Fauré was liberal in the highest degree. I would say he had a profound sense of respect. Respect for himself and for others, respect for things and beings; respect he would show us, as if the very thought of influencing us had never even occurred to him; a respect that was his alone and that acted upon us and made us more conscious of "being" . . . We were aware of his desire to understand us and to say to each one whatever would allow him to find his own way more easily.<sup>16</sup>

Vuillermoz similarly stressed that his teacher never tried "to impose the seal of his own personality" upon his pupils. "His principal concern was, on the contrary, to allow the individual qualities of the young creators in his care to develop freely. He helped them when they were in trouble, but allowed their personal temperaments to assert themselves."<sup>17</sup> The testimony of Louis Aubert was the same: "We listened to him, we loved him, we were grateful to him for placing no constraint upon our emerging personalities."<sup>18</sup> In the late 1890s, such liberal practices were far from universal in France's conservatories. Composers, critics, and educators of the period often made a point of contrasting Fauré's openhanded approach with the methods of his more conservative predecessors at the Conservatoire. But more significantly, Fauré's program seemed liberal even beside that of his younger and more loudly innovative colleague, Vincent d'Indy. D'Indy had instituted a pioneering systematic and historical curriculum at the Schola Cantorum. At the same time, however, his outward pedagogical attitude remained autocratic, and critics of the period did not hesitate to compare him to a soldier of Christ leading the Church Militant.<sup>19</sup>

In 1899, after one of Fauré's students, Florent Schmitt, made an unsuccessful bid for the Prix de Rome, Fauré wrote an illuminating letter to

Schmitt's benefactor, Madame de Chaumont-Quitry. This is the second meditation on sincerity and artistic vocation we have from Fauré. He begins the following paragraph with reference to Schmitt, but he soon shifts to a more personal perspective.

For my part, I would try to allay his worries about finding a direction, a path. His artistic conscience alone should guide him, the desire for expression in sentiment and perfection in form, without concern for immediate or distant success . . . To express what you have within you with sincerity and in the clearest and most perfect terms possible would always seem to me the summit of art.

As if embarrassed to have caught himself in a moment of speculation, Fauré immediately added, "But that's so simple it must seem foolish!"<sup>20</sup> Fauré here made a rare profession of artistic faith. He delicately cast doubt on the value of eyeing success or trying too hard to stand out. These worries on Schmitt's part, he implied, were premature and moreover generally at cross purposes with the finer goals named in the next sentence: sincerity, clarity, and perfection. Of these three qualities, sincerity is certainly the most distinctive, and it made for a valuable lesson as Fauré's students began their careers.

We can trace the profound consequences of Fauré's position in a letter Kœchlin wrote to Fauré on 15 June 1921. Kœchlin had just dedicated a violin sonata to his old teacher.

I wanted to dedicate to you only a work in which I felt, genuinely, I had put something of myself, in a language of my own – and music nevertheless. Whether I managed this, the future will decide. For an artist the essential thing is to have written his work, to have done his best. And I can say that I never had before me a more perfect model . . . than that of your works. Not that I claim, in my sonata, either to match them or to imitate them; but they have enlightened me with their serene light and their absolute sincerity, which is to make the music one loves.<sup>21</sup>

This letter testifies to Fauré's success in transmitting his artistic values, built on sincerity, to his students. For Fauré and his circle, music is a translation of the self; the composer does best when he "makes the music he loves." Significantly, Kœchlin acknowledges Fauré's work as a model – but an ethical model rather than a stylistic one. He denies the act of imitation, technical mimicry, and invokes instead a luminous emanation, symbolizing the spiritual value of sincerity. I spoke earlier of the conflation of morality and aesthetics in this milieu: now it is clear that as an ethical value transposed into creative action, "sincerity" essentially left the composer free to choose his own stylistic means. As Fauré put it, "Every artist [is] free to translate his

thought, his sensibility, by the means it pleases him to choose" (above, p. 12). Hence, further on in this same letter, Kœchlin explains his stylistic experiments in terms of his own sensibility. He disdains other pretexts for novelty and rejects innovation as an end in itself: "You know, of course, that in every instance I have only written harmonies or developments because they corresponded to the expression of what I felt – never to astonish the gallery or to strive for something more or less new." By emphasizing the idea of sincerity rather than laying down a particular stylistic doctrine, Fauré tried to show his students that the best music gives "the gift of oneself." Sincerity, exemplified in a constructive and tolerant approach to the development of his students' unique musical personalities, was perhaps the most valuable legacy of Fauré's teaching.

## 2 Why sincerity?

We are now in a position to consider how sincerity became a central aesthetic category in Fauré's time and why. One way to determine the significance of sincerity in musical practice is to identify what it opposed: what would constitute insincerity in composition?

In the foregoing discussion we already glimpsed some of sincerity's negative counterparts. Dukas referred dimly to those who "did their utmost to rise above themselves"; Debussy deplored any timid submission to authority or convention; Duparc considered the obedience to schools or trends beneath the dignity of a real composer; and Kœchlin rejected innovation as an end in itself. A common motive stands behind all of these faults: to try to be what one is not. For a particular shade of this deception, turn-of-the-century French society found a new word, *arrivisme*, and it is the *arriviste* who most often plays the foil to the sincere artist.

According to Robert's dictionary, an *arriviste* is an unscrupulous person who wants to make his mark in the world by any means that suit his purposes. The word, derived from the verb *arriver*, made its first appearance in 1893; within ten years the inevitable suffix came to consecrate it: *arrivisme*.<sup>22</sup> I can think of no illustration of *arrivisme* better suited to the present discussion than Proust's trenchant depiction of Charles Morel in *Le côté de Guermantes*. Marcel, the narrator, one day receives a visit from a young man, Morel, previously unknown to him. He is the son of Marcel's late uncle's personal manservant but looks nothing like a servant himself. He dresses "rather more lavishly than in good taste" and is quick to introduce himself, with a satisfied smile, as a "premier prix du Conservatoire." After a bit of conversation, Marcel sizes up his guest:

I realized that Morel's son was very "arriviste." Hence that very day he asked me if I, being a bit of a composer myself and capable of putting a few lines to music, might not know of a poet really well-positioned in the upper crust [dans le monde "aristo"]. I named one. He didn't know this poet's work and had never heard his name, which he jotted down. Well, I found out that soon afterward he wrote the poet to tell him that, being a fanatical admirer of his works, he had set a sonnet of his to music and would be happy if the librettist would arrange a performance of it at the salon of Countess so-and-so. This was jumping the gun a bit and giving away his game. The poet, offended, did not respond.<sup>23</sup>

This passage is especially felicitous in the way it binds Morel's social climbing to his shallow understanding of his vocation as a composer. These, of course, are opposite sides of the same coin. Morel, in his work as in his social conduct, is an arriviste because he composes music at profit to himself and with self-promotion first in mind.

Albert Bertelin, who knew Fauré from 1897 onward, wrote in a memoir, "Any new endeavor, every step forward, elicited his sympathies, but he did not like arrivistes."<sup>24</sup> Fauré himself used the neologism as early as 1910, in a letter deploring "this era of operators [faiseurs] and arrivistes" in contrast to the "noble, disinterested career" pursued by his father-in-law, the sculptor Emmanuel Fremiet.<sup>25</sup> And in the very last letter he wrote, he tried to console his wife with the thought that he – like her father, Fremiet – would die having followed a "disinterested career" and having left behind the "pure beauty" of his works. "In these hard times, nonetheless shot through with arrivisme, doesn't all that count for something?"<sup>26</sup> Fauré implicitly opposed a "disinterested career," here engaged in the pursuit of "pure beauty," to arrivisme. The fictional Morel exemplifies the "interested" career, pledged to something more immediately profitable than "sincerity" or "pure beauty." Such artistic tradesmanship provoked Debussy's ready indignation, too, as early as 1912, when he delivered a long reproof to composers chasing after fashion and formulas rather than looking for music within themselves.

You learn to crawl before you walk. This is something our epoch of frantic "arrivisme" deliberately forgets as it stockpiles works that serve only to fulfill the need to satisfy a fashion, necessarily unstable. And to think how many "arrivistes" haven't even "left" yet! When will we decide to shatter the idea, all too current, that it's as easy to be an artist as a dentist? . . . Let us try to relieve music, not of those who truly love her, but of those who would profit from her by usurping the good name of artists!<sup>27</sup>

In a memoir written in 1923, Edouard Dujardin would make the conceptual opposition between sincerity and arrivisme explicit. Writing about the

era of the *Revue wagnérienne* (1885 to 1888) in France, he separated the young composers attracted to the Wagnerian cult at the *Concerts Lamoureux* into two categories: "Around Lamoureux gathered . . . most of our Wagnerians, young composers, the sincere ones and the arrivistes alike." Dujardin characterized the latter as "able to see in Lamoureux only the man who would play their pieces in concert, the man who would become the director of a great musical theater."<sup>28</sup>

Dujardin provides an example of a retrospective application of the word "arriviste." He wrote at a moment when arrivisme was at high tide, the *années folles* of the early 1920s. Arguments about arrivisme came into full prominence only after 1918, in the wake of a war that changed the direction of artistic tendencies and altered social structures. Paul Landormy, looking back on these years, wrote: "This was no longer the age of works pondered for many years, patiently polished and repolished. This was not the time for unhurried careers that bring a man glory in his old age or in the grave . . . The rush to success was general . . . Art took on an aggressive aspect it had never presented before."<sup>29</sup> While we might immediately presume that only the older and more conservative artists opposed this atmosphere of self-promotion, there was no clear-cut generational division. For instance, the cubist painter and poet Max Jacob, associated with Picasso and Apollinaire, had as little patience as Fauré or Debussy for arrivistes. When asked to define the nature of sincerity in artistic expression, Jacob responded, "Sincerity is a faith, a conviction in direct opposition to the charlatanism of the brigaded parties of pictorial arrivisme."<sup>30</sup>

Brash personal ambition, often designated by the word "tapage" – blatant or noisy publicity – certainly troubled composers and critics alike, but self-promotion, albeit louder than before, was hardly a newcomer to the Parisian musical scene. Not merely ambition, therefore, but relentless stylistic change, the displacement of one trend by another in quick succession, disturbed the atmosphere most momentarily. Jacob's reference to "charlatanisme" – quackery – reveals the most notable consequence of this condition: the sense that a certain amount of new music perpetrated its novelty under false pretenses. These pretenses came in various shades: straining for effect, playing to the gallery, dotting on fashion or convention, seeking to astonish – critics varied their accusations from case to case. Writing a preface to Georges Jean-Aubry's *La musique française d'aujourd'hui* in 1916, Fauré assessed this stylistic fragmentation coolly but also included a passing reproach:

Under the favorable conditions of a continuing, voluptuous peace, which we believed could never be disturbed, a number of artists consumed by the fever

of the new, created – one after another, in the wake of impressionism – intentionism, cubism and more, while certain musicians, less daring, tried to suppress feeling in their works and substitute sensation in its place, forgetting that sensation is in fact the first stage of feeling.<sup>31</sup>

Incidentally, those who recall no artistic movement by the name of intentionism (“intentionnisme”) are not wrong. Fauré wryly cited a fictional trend, which he borrowed from a speech Gounod delivered to the Institut on 20 October 1883.<sup>32</sup> More pointed is Fauré’s distinction between “feeling” and “sensation,” whereby he implies that sacrificing feeling to sensation means sacrificing something deeply experienced to immediate, superficial effects. Rather than moving to a direct affirmation of this point, however, Fauré then seems to leave it aside; he begins a new paragraph, wondering aloud if the crisis of war might not “restore us to ourselves.” But this sentence, beginning so abstractly, then goes on to name “sincerity” and “the disdain of grand effects” among the virtues that will contribute to the renewal of French music after the battle. Fauré’s critique of charlatanism in music thus, as we should expect, takes aim at artists who calculate sensational “effects” instead of sincerely expressing a personal sensibility.

It is well to remember that a general crisis of personal autonomy in stylistic choice beleaguered artists long before the First World War. Fauré, with his reference to “intentionism,” slyly linked his own position back to Gounod’s. The older composer was far less lenient toward society than Fauré and took it upon himself to criticize a number of “current opinions . . . that form the immense heritage of accepted absurdities.” Among these “is one that consists in believing, or rather in making people believe, that the sympathy and protection of society are necessary for an artist to succeed [arriver] . . . There is only one protection that an artist should get worked up about, for it is the only one worth any trouble at all, and that is absolute sincerity toward oneself.”<sup>33</sup> Sincerity was a key issue for Gounod, who in his thinking on this topic may have been more Fauré’s mentor than Saint-Saëns, who seldom spoke of sincerity.<sup>34</sup>

In the presence of drastic stylistic fragmentation, the motivations of compositional choices readily came under suspicion. Establishing whether a composer’s motives were sincere or not became a routine practice in private letters as in public criticism. Artists and critics began to wonder more openly about the relationship between style and personality. Oscar Wilde, whom Jean Pierrot has called “the prime theoretician of French decadence,” early on recognized the fragile nature of artistic personality but manifested this recognition by adopting a paradoxical attitude toward sincerity.<sup>35</sup> To this end, he went out of his way to represent personal identity as fundamen-

tally malleable. Insincerity, he pointed out, “is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities.”<sup>36</sup> Put into artistic practice, insincerity would abolish the very idea of stylistic consistency and blur beyond recognition authentic reflections of the artist’s personality in his work. To imagine this practice is therefore to imagine the overthrow of two of the most cherished principles of traditional (romantic) European aesthetics. Wilde, for all his speculation, remained on the outskirts of such a radical undertaking. Indeed, he did not hesitate to counter his own aphorisms. He brought the value of insincerity into question most forcefully in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. “There is no such thing as a good influence, Mr. Gray,” says Lord Henry. “All influence is immoral . . . because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions . . . He becomes an echo of someone else’s music.” Dorian Gray, the allegorical victim of the influences that finally consume his being, vividly personifies insincerity and certainly bears out Lord Henry’s ironic warning. Similarly, we might say that a composer who works against his “inner harmonies” or who too slavishly follows in the steps of others risks becoming an echo of techniques and ideas absorbed from outside himself: the reverberation of someone else’s music. Lord Henry therefore concludes, “The aim of life is self-development. To realize one’s nature perfectly – that is what each of us is here for.”<sup>37</sup> His sermon, of course, could not be more ironic. He urges self-development but divulges no solution to the fundamental problem – how to “realize one’s nature perfectly” in a world of influences that tell us how to represent ourselves to ourselves. This paradoxical condition renders all appeals to the artist’s “true self” incalculable; the self is already an echo of other selves. Wilde thus swiftly brings the very idea of sincerity to an abyss. Once sincerity itself qualifies as a pose, another “method by which we can multiply our personalities,” we can go no further with the concept. But musicians of the period kept clear of pushing the concept to this extreme, perhaps because, as we begin to see, it was much too valuable to them.

Their apparent lack of sophistication came down to self-preservation. By the end of the war, those who wished to advocate recent music found themselves at pains to justify novelty of any kind. Certainly a large proportion of the public felt itself at a loss to distinguish the sincere artists from the posers and looked to musical authorities for guidance. Koehlin, in his important contribution to the *Encyclopédie de la musique*, “*Les tendances de la musique moderne française*” (1921), confronted this problem directly. In the course of justifying polytonality as a legitimate musical procedure, he wrote,



With new works, the public goes from one extreme to the other . . . “They are making fools of us,” we hear over and over again, until one day people suddenly declare, “This is sublime” . . . Contemporary harmonies will often seem disconcerting – even to more than one professional colleague. However, let no one suppose that these inventions are some kind of bad joke; let no one think that the best of these composers wish to astonish the gallery. They do not lack sincerity.<sup>38</sup>

Kœchlin consistently defended novelty as a means of personal expression. However, as we know, he disdained novelty as an end in itself, or something gauged to shock the bourgeoisie.<sup>39</sup> A composer who resorts to novelty in order to astonish his audience also does so in order to draw attention to himself. He becomes an arriviste. In his excessive concern for public response, he introduces obstacles between his inner life and his music. The translation he produces will be muddled.

We may conclude that a style can, at opposite extremes, either represent a personal sensibility sincerely translated into music or a superficial pre-occupation with fashion and success. Fauré’s contemporaries consistently laid his musical style at the first of these two extremes. In the twentieth-century musical press his work figured continuously as an achievement that managed to be both novel and “sincerely translated” at the same time. This coupling proved a decisive signifier of permanent musical value. In 1921, Kœchlin could look back upon Chabrier, Debussy, and Fauré as masterful innovators, but their modernity was admirable because it was sincere. In each of these composers, there was “an unaffected quality, especially free of self-importance, that never strives to show off erudition or modernity.” They achieved something new, yet, again, “they wrote what they loved.”<sup>40</sup>

Fauré’s unassuming personal character and constructive leadership in musical life only enhanced this reputation. “Never was there an artist more hostile to puffery, to publicity, to all forms of self-exaltation, than Fauré,” said Camille Bellaigue, who was intimately acquainted with Fauré’s private and professional conduct.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, a critic who apparently never knew Fauré intimately but who followed his career and recognized the value of his work at the Conservatoire gave a similar appraisal:

Rather more heedless than disdainful of publicity (so foreign was the very thought to his relaxed sense of spiritual self-respect), he created his work simply, without public fanfare, handing on the greater part of it to a publisher who never bothered much with it, and glory came to him without accessory, commanding attention little by little, everywhere, and not without amazing Fauré himself. This great artist was indeed strangely modest . . . No career was ever more devoid of arrivisme.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, the eulogistic tone of these passages cannot be ignored; Marnold and Bellaigue each made their observations very shortly after Fauré died. It is therefore important to find similar testimony at least as early as 1887, when Hugues Imbert interviewed Fauré and produced a lengthy critical and biographical notice, the first such essay devoted to the composer. In the first paragraph Imbert asserted, "If ever a man held publicity in high contempt, and kept his distance from all compromises with questionable public tastes, it is Gabriel Fauré." Imbert added, "He pursues his goal with true passion, without the slightest care for the world's opinion."<sup>43</sup> It is significant that Imbert did not choose to underscore this artistic attitude in his studies on Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, and others included in his *Profils de musiciens*. We may adduce a second example from the following year. In a review of Fauré's Requiem, Camille Benoît drew attention to the "personal imprint" Fauré gave his work, contrasting it with the music of those "malleable servants of prevailing taste" who "attune themselves to fashion" and "received ideas" – by which Benoît meant the music that the affluent, fashionable parishioners of La Madeleine were more accustomed to hearing.<sup>44</sup>

Fauré was still an obscure figure in 1888. When he was named to replace Dubois as Director of the Conservatoire in 1905, his position in musical life changed dramatically; he was launched into public, even national, notoriety. In these changed circumstances, his enduring personal modesty became something really unusual. At the moment of the nomination, Alfred Bruneau expressed pleasure at the sudden recognition it brought Fauré. That social and institutional ambitions had played little role in Fauré's preceding career evidently intensified this satisfaction. "None of our composers better warrants universal and fervent admiration than Gabriel Fauré. Without ever sacrificing anything to fashion, snobbery, puffery, or the peremptory needs of the throng; without ever lowering himself to covet, seek, or beg for cheap success, he built the edifice of his music patiently and honorably."<sup>45</sup> The next year, Pierre Lalo, reviewing the composer's new quintet, likewise saluted Fauré's sustained resistance to the enticements of fashion and publicity.<sup>46</sup> Over the next fifteen years such observations would become predictable yet continued to carry great authority; the perception that Fauré had achieved what he had done without compromising his personal and artistic integrity spoke directly to the preoccupations of an age increasingly fraught with arrivisme.

Many held up Fauré's disinterested career as a sane exemplar for younger composers in the frenetic twenties. Among such advocates, Kœchlin was perhaps most outspoken. We should recall that Kœchlin, four years Debussy's junior, was one of the most broad-minded musicians of his generation in France. The young Poulenc, spurned by Paul Vidal and unable to

attract Ravel's interest, found a sympathetic teacher in Kœchlin, as did Henri Sauguet and the so-called *École d'Arcueil* that formed around Satie in 1923. Kœchlin wanted these exuberant twenty-year-olds to reflect on their own creative inclinations, to pursue their vocation sincerely rather than thoughtlessly committing themselves to the latest trend. In this he found the ideal model in his own teacher, "never donning a mask, never striving for effect, never wishing to seem anybody but himself."<sup>47</sup> During these years Kœchlin developed his own calling as a teacher and proposed a course of action to those who would listen to him. He spoke of "the moral quality of an art created by the artist for himself, for the sake of music, without concessions either to the tastes of the moment or to personal vanity."<sup>48</sup> In his biography of Fauré, published in 1927, he passionately maintained the uselessness of ignoring individual sensibility or bowing to the dictates of fashion:

This kind of "novelty" declares itself the very opposite of art, since it is neither felt, nor created, nor personal . . . All lasting beauty is born, lives and survives – eternal, outside of fashion. The artist wants an aesthetic diametrically opposed to that of a "man of the world" whose eye (temporarily) becomes accustomed to some baroque line or illogical distortion, ugly in itself, simply because it is chic . . . If [Fauré] did not seek to retreat from all the trends that excited discussions among the snobs, which would have been a slavery in reverse, at least he was never pulled in by their undertows.<sup>49</sup>

This independence from fashion and public opinion leads to a focus on the work itself, on the composer's "inner harmony" and that "pure beauty" of which Fauré spoke in his letters. The composer should write his music "for the Muse alone, for pure beauty, for a dream of something better and of the beyond"; he should not look to the public or his colleagues, but proceed aloof to critics and future success. "Think only of the work, do not fear simple and modest means, be yourself" – this was Kœchlin's Fauréan message to a new generation of artists.<sup>50</sup>

Another student of Fauré's, Émile Vuillermoz, reviewing a new work by his former teacher in 1921, took the opportunity to admonish a group of young composers whose activities struck him as less than disinterested:

At the present moment, when hasty innovators are turning aesthetics topsy-turvy in order to discover, faster than their rivals, the unknown treasure destined to enrich them, the Piano Quintet [Fauré's op. 115] brings us a wise reminder . . . In these four movements there are more victorious annexations [to modernity] than in all the trophies currently brandished by certain apprentices in music, anxious to organize a profitable revolution for their own benefit.<sup>51</sup>

Vuillermoz probably intended this sharp critique for “Les six,” then at the height of their antics. No doubt the collaborative venture *Les mariés de la tour Eiffel*, organized by Cocteau the summer beforehand, had irritated Vuillermoz, who saw more love of self-advertisement than of art in such stunts. However, it is well known that “Les six” existed on the pages of a newspaper far more cohesively than in life. After their musical outfit had its brief heyday under Cocteau, each member of the group found (or returned to) an individual path. Had Vuillermoz gone to the trouble to interview Honegger, Milhaud or Auric, he would have found himself preaching to the converted. Milhaud, for example, who had been a student of Dukas and Gédalge at the Conservatoire, never concealed his profound admiration for Fauré. As early as 1923 he published a homage more persuasive in presenting Fauré as a positive artistic model than anything Vuillermoz had written. In this essay Milhaud evokes the influences of Franck, Wagner, Debussy and Russian music and marvels at Fauré’s stylistic independence amid the changing currents. “What do [all these] matter to him?” asks Milhaud. “Fauré simply lets his heart sing and gives us the tenderest, the sincerest music imaginable.”<sup>52</sup>

The details of the preceding citations suggest that at least three sufficient reasons led Fauré’s contemporaries to single him out as a sincere composer. First, he remained aloof to fashion, to trends he did not need in order to express himself. Second, he did not, at least in anyone’s judgment, put his art in the service of vanity or personal gain. And third, he did not innovate in order to goad the public, but only in order to express himself, to translate his sensibility; he was modern by “inner necessity.” Lest this final reason be dismissed as redundant pleading, let us remember that some composers in the first two decades of the century certainly did innovate in order to provoke the public, and many more ran the risk of the accusation. Between 1900 and 1914, Richard Strauss was frequently the object of such criticism. In the most insightful judgments, this reproach was usually tempered by a sincere expression of respect and even awe for Strauss’s craftsmanship and power. Such was the case, for example, with the English poet and critic Arthur Symons. Writing in 1905, he wanted to be clear that it was not the modernity of Strauss’s style that disturbed him:

Strauss chooses to disconcert the ear; I am ready to be disconcerted, and to admire the skill with which he disconcerts me. I mind none of the dissonances, queer intervals, sudden changes; but I want them to convince me of what they are meant to say. The talk of ugliness is a mere device for drawing one aside from the trail. Vital sincerity is what matters, the direct energy of life itself, forcing the music to be its own voice. Do we find that in this astonishingly clever music?

I do not find it.<sup>53</sup>

Symons did not go so far as to accuse Strauss of pandering to his audiences; rather he suggested that the composer acted on cravings whose motives were “elaborate, intellectual and frigid” rather than passionate and personal.<sup>54</sup>

Although we could wish that Fauré himself left more evidence of his attitude toward modernity of style and musical arrivisme, one final witness in this indirect account may help us better understand the implications of his basic principles. André Messager, like Fauré, received his musical training and general education at the École Niedermeyer. In fact, in 1871 he became Fauré’s very first pupil. The two young musicians, only eight years apart, became close friends. As Fauré recalled, “Our initial conversations – I dare not say lessons – were enough to convince us that we were meant to be friends, and since that time, this friendship, I’m proud and happy to say, has never abated.”<sup>55</sup> Messager wrote primarily for the stage and served as the administrator and conductor at various times of the Paris Opéra, the Opéra-Comique, and Covent Garden. Fauré, the master of song and chamber music, and Messager, the man of the theater, bequeathed very different legacies, but they both held sincerity at the core of their artistic values.

In the course of an interview held in 1928, a year before he died, Messager reflected on recent musical trends. His statements confirm that sincerity was a central category in his aesthetics and had a direct bearing on his judgment of new works:

[The young composers] want to prospect new claims . . . Let us respect this endeavor and their efforts. Are they on the right track? I have no idea. I’m not keen on everything they’re offering us, but who can assure me that I am not wrong? . . . People reproach the young for not bothering to study the rules, for rushing toward success [d’être pressés d’arriver], for grasping after money – it’s all possible! But let’s not forget: we have built the rules on celebrated works and not the other way around. Rules of composition are only empirical products. But styles change . . . I couldn’t care less if one composer writes a “polytonal” piece while another writes an “atonal” one. What is essential is that the work be sincere; if so, who has the right to hinder his hopes, his sensibility, his tendencies? No one has the authority to discourage an effort or block the work of an artist.<sup>56</sup>

It is neither rash nor difficult to align this statement with Fauré’s views. In effect, the last part of Messager’s declaration echoes and elaborates the response Fauré made to *Le Figaro* when he was asked in 1905 to indicate his intentions as the new director of the Conservatoire:

I should like to put myself in the service of an art at once classical and modern, sacrificing neither contemporary taste to salutary traditions nor

traditions to the whims of fashion. But what I advocate above all is liberalism: I would not wish to exclude any serious ideas. I'm not biased in favor of any school and there is no type of music I'm inclined to ban, provided it springs from a sincere and considered doctrine.<sup>57</sup>

Messageur's testimony helps us to understand the consequences of Fauré's stated position. Of all the contributions the idea of sincerity could make to the vitality of French twentieth-century music, this tolerance for stylistic change was the most compelling. Behind the noble, eulogizing vapors that waft through critical discourses about Fauré, there is indeed something of substance. Fauré's and Messageur's profound liberality clearly set them apart from contemporaries such as Saint-Saëns and d'Indy, both of whom, in very different ways, placed limits on the possibilities of musical expression by insisting on fixed principles of form and style. The concept of sincerity, on the other hand, places no definite limits on style or expression. It is neutral to style, and this crucial property accounted in no small part for Fauré's success with his students, his beneficent influence on musical life, and his high repute with composers as young as Auric and Milhaud, some fifty years his juniors. Thus Fauré's simple rhetorical question – "Isn't every artist free to translate his thought, his sensibility, by the means it pleases him to choose?" – proved extremely consequential. His question subordinates outward stylistic allegiances to a personal standard of beauty, and what counted for Fauré were the individual qualities of the resulting work. By upholding the idea of sincerity instead of insisting on a fixed stylistic doctrine, Fauré prolonged his own creative life through an era of great change; at the same time he broad-mindedly prepared a favorable ground for the self-determined development of younger composers. Saint-Saëns and d'Indy, on the other hand, however noble their intentions, each fatally undermined his own capacity to influence younger composers by demanding obedience to specific stylistic norms.<sup>58</sup>

As an aesthetic and ethical category, sincerity responded to some of the strongest issues forced on composers working after the turn of the century. Its practice meant that a new generation might find personal routes through a stylistic emporium whose attractions included both the risk of the new and the lure of tradition. Opposed to fashion, fads and self-promotion, sincerity did not ignore historical and social factors but rather placed them in a radically individual perspective. A composer who managed to discover a relation to past or present music by such personal means – that is, in Fauré's words, "with the help of his sensibility and in the measure of his gifts"<sup>59</sup> – was a sincere artist.

### 3 Questioning sincerity

I have tried to show how certain historical conditions made sincerity a key aesthetic category in French musical culture during Fauré's lifetime. Since these same conditions likewise affected the endeavors of writers and visual artists, the question of sincerity naturally entered a wide arena of debate. Indeed, far from being a parochial concern, sincerity in this period took on a general cultural significance that might be compared to present-day discussions of gender in personal and social identity. Beyond what amounts to a fixation on the question of sincerity among artists and critics, perhaps the most telling emblem of the weight the concept bore in French culture was the publication, between 1905 and 1920, of at least five books touching on sincerity or exclusively devoted to it by professional philosophers.<sup>60</sup> In the absence of such philosophical work, we might be tempted to assume that composers latched onto the category of sincerity as a convenient term of praise without reflection on its equivocal nature.

To a certain degree, nonetheless, this accusation is true. If we examine one of these treatises, Gabriel Dromard's *Essai sur la sincérité*, we encounter processes of reasoning and an attention to nuance and implication quite unlike anything met with in musical writings. Seeking the greatest possible clarity, Dromard makes his hypotheses explicit: "The man of an ideal sincerity would be one who would reflect, both within his own consciousness and in his modes of expression, the whole substance and nothing but the substance of his ideas and feelings; one who would translate everything he feels and everything he conceives fully and faithfully, before himself as before others."<sup>61</sup> On the one hand, this definition jibes with views of sincerity held by contemporary musicians and even turns on the same essential action: translation. On the other hand, Dromard brings in a crucial modifier – ideal – by which he indicates from the outset of his study that it is not possible to realize such perfect sincerity toward oneself. If we cannot be perfectly sincere with ourselves, it follows that we cannot be perfectly sincere with others. "How can we appear as what we are, when what we are does not square with what we believe we are? How can we express our inner realities faithfully when we can by no means place ourselves outside of sham and imaginary representations of these realities?" Dromard acknowledges that we mask parts of ourselves from ourselves in order to act in everyday life and concludes that "from this absolute point of view, we can say without hesitation that sincerity toward others is impossible since the very basis of this sincerity is neither realized nor realizable" (pp. 7–8). In this conclusion he seems to second Wilde's paradoxical view of sincerity. Of course, maintain-