

39. Fauré

Après un rêve

(For Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Together with Duparc and Debussy, Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) was one of the three great masters of the French *mélodie*. Donald Jay Grout, in *A History of Western Music*, writes that Fauré's

'refined, highly civilised music embodies the aristocratic qualities of the French tradition. ... Order and restraint are fundamental. Emotion and depiction are conveyed only as they have been entirely transmuted into music. That music ... tends always to be lyric or dance-like rather than epic or dramatic, economical rather than profuse, simple rather than complex, reserved rather than grandiloquent; above all, it is not concerned with delivering a Message, whether about the fate of the cosmos or the state of the composer's soul'.

The listener, he continues, must be sensitive to 'quiet statement, nuance and exquisite detail.'

Fauré composed mainly songs, chamber music and piano music, together with a very few orchestral works and a small body of church music that includes the popular *Requiem*.

Achieving widespread recognition late in life, he became a professor at the Paris Conservatoire in 1896 and the Director in 1905, holding this post until 1920.

'Après un rêve' was an early work, published in 1878; the exact date of its composition is not known. With many households owning a piano, solo songs were a popular form of domestic entertainment that found a ready market with publishers. Fauré sold his songs at 50 francs each with full copyright, and in consequence made little from their subsequent popularity.

'Après un rêve' can now be bought arranged for every instrument from flute to trombone.

Performing forces and their handling

In this song, both voice and piano are used with great restraint. The poem suits either a male or female character, and the vocal line is simply marked 'Voix' ('Voice'). With a range of an eleventh, the vocal part has room for flexibility but avoids extremes. The piano part sets up a single rhythmic pattern that is maintained throughout the song, with right-hand chords of three or four notes and a bass line in single notes or octaves. The right-hand part, with a range of less than two octaves, never rises more than an octave above middle C.

The accentuation and expression of the words

The accentuation of spoken French is very different from spoken English. English words have a set accent, which may be at the beginning, middle or end of the word (e.g. *final*, *intermediate*, *begin*). Speakers in French, on the other hand, emphasise the last syllable (other than the 'mute e') within a word. Across a whole sentence, it is the last syllable of the final word that carries the greatest weight. Thus the accented syllables in the first line of 'Après un rêve' are '*Dans un sommeil que charmait ton image*', with *image* carrying the most emphasis. You will notice that Fauré matches these accents precisely in the music, placing

them on strong beats, and additionally emphasising them with higher pitch (E flat in bar 3) or greater length (C in bar 4). Notice also that the 'mute e', which would not be pronounced at the end of a word such as 'image' in normal speech, is spoken in poetry and set in song-writing. This gives each line a graceful shading-off after the emphasis on the final word.

Structure

Modified strophic form (A A1 B)

- Fauré has chosen a structure that matches the content of the poem. Verses 1 and 2 describe the dream – an ecstatic imagined elopement into the great blue yonder. In verse 3 the singer has awoken, but 'cries to dream again'.
 - 'A' section: Bars 2-15 (preceded by one bar of piano introduction).
 - 'A1' section: Bars 17-30²: a varied repeat of bars 2-15, after a single transitional bar for piano (bar 16). There are modifications from bar 26 onwards.
 - B section: Bars 30³-48. The material is related to the previous sections but the treatment is new.

Varied phrase lengths

- The shifting sense of the dream-scene is evoked by varied phrase lengths. Leaving aside the piano-only bars, the structure is as follows.
 - Bars 2-15: 3+4 bars, 3+4 bars.
 - Bars 17-30: 3+4 bars, 3+2+2 bars. The shortening of the phrases builds up tension at the end of the verse, which leads into the next section with no piano interlude.
 - Bars 30³-47: 4 + 4 + 4 + 5 bars.

Tonality

Chromaticism

Before discussing tonality, harmony and melody in this song, it will be helpful to consider some of the varied applications of the word 'chromatic'. A chromatic scale includes all twelve semitones to be found in an octave, as distinct from a diatonic scale such as C major, which contains only seven. In minor keys, some chromaticism is found in the 'melodic' form of the scale, which includes alternative forms of the 6th and 7th note.

C melodic minor scale.

Raised forms of the 6th and 7th notes are used ascending.

Lowered forms, as in the key signature, are used descending.



In much tonal music, some of the notes of the scale are altered from time to time. This may be done in order to change the key for a significant period (structural modulation), or it may briefly colour the music with chromatic melodic decoration, transient modulations or altered chords in the harmony.

Fauré includes frequent small chromatic alterations in the accompaniment, which often produce **secondary dominants**, or play on the **contrast of major and minor chords**. In keeping with his highly refined aesthetic, his harmonic excursions are carefully prepared and resolved, and he ensures that even his most dramatic effects feel inevitable in their context.

Tonality

- **C minor. Perfect cadence** in C minor in the final bars (45-47). Until then, Fauré avoids clear-cut perfect cadences in the home key.
- **Imperfect cadences** in C are reached at principal phrase-ends: bars 6-8, 21-23 and 36-38.
- There is one **structural modulation**, marked by the perfect cadence in E flat major (bars 14-15) at the end of the first section.
- Elsewhere, tonality passes through a number of **transient modulations**, such as the movement through F minor, B flat minor and A flat major in bars 28-34.
- **Modal inflections**. See below for detail.

Harmony

- Fauré's harmony is broadly **functional**. It is organised around the 'magnetic' pull from the dominant to the tonic. However, the route towards the dominant is often lengthy and circuitous (e.g. tonic in bar 2, with dominant not reached until bar 7, with an intervening **circle of fifths** on F – B flat – E flat – A flat – D).
- Additional interest is provided by the use of **secondary dominants**, especially during the circle of fifths in bars 3-7.
- Most chords are in **root position** or **first inversion**.
- The part-writing and use of chromatic alterations generate a variety of complex chords, including:
 - **dominant sevenths** (bars 7-8) and **minor sevenths** (bar 11)
 - **diminished seventh** (bar 11³) and **'half-diminished' seventh** (ii7 – bar 6³)
 - **dominant ninths** (bar 3, 4, 5), sometimes with **4-3 suspension** as in bar 5, and **dominant minor ninth** (bar 5³)
 - **augmented triad** (bar 6¹, bar 16¹)
 - **neapolitan sixth** (flat supertonic, D flat major, bar 27).
- Modal characteristics (tending to loosen the functional pull of the music) include:
 - **avoidance of the raised leading note** (e.g. piano bar 2, voice bar 7)
 - **major/minor** ambiguity. In bars 14-15 the melody appears to be approaching the cadence in E flat minor, but the cadence is in the major key. This effect is repeated in bars 27–28 in C minor/major
 - **false relation in bar 7**, where B natural and B flat sound together.

Expressive use of harmony.

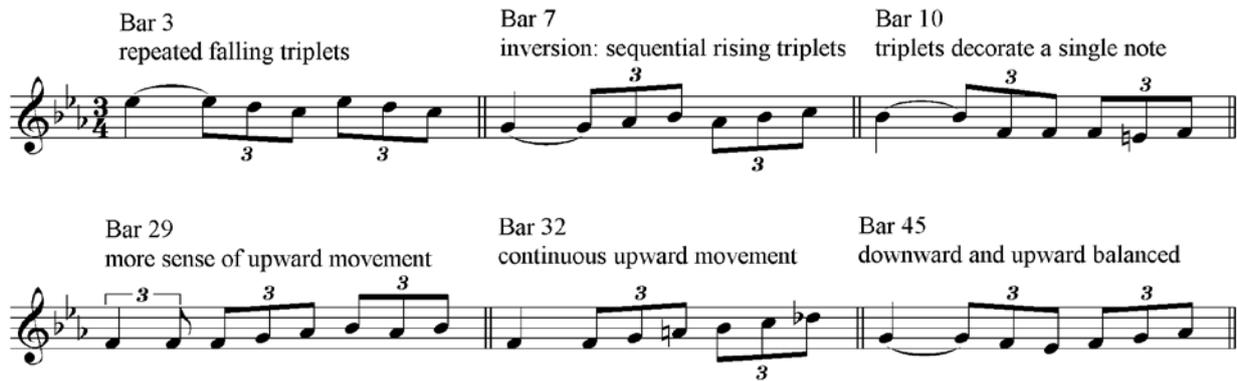
As with other aspects of the song, Fauré's harmonic vocabulary responds to the content of the text.

- At the start, the C minor chord is in the middle register of the piano only. The F9 chord in bar 3, which pulls us away from C minor, is unexpected in its major colouring and richness of texture, and emphasises the final syllable of the word '*sommeil*' (sleep).
- The circle of fifths in bars 3-7 includes a chain of dissonances, creating a sense of shifting instability.
- In bars 14-15 the suggestion of E flat minor, followed by E flat major, depicts the brightening of the dawn, described in the words.
- In bars 28-30 the music arrives (by analogy with bars 14-15) at a chord of C major (dominant of F) rather than C minor. This helps to propel us towards the outburst at '*Hélas*'.
- One of the boldest harmonic strokes is reserved for the word '*radieuse*' (radiant) in bars 40-41. Two notes are chromatically altered simultaneously to create the D7 chord – the only time in the song that this chord appears.

Melody

Pitch and rhythm are inseparable in this melody, which creates a totally integrated sense of organic development although it contains comparatively little direct repetition.

- Most of the vocal writing is **syllabic**, but there are conspicuous **melismas on the triplet groups** at the ends of phrases (bars 7, 22 etc.), where the melodic impulse takes priority over the text.
- The movement is mainly conjunct, but **every phrase includes a defining leap or outlines a significant interval**.
 - The sixth plays a particularly important part, outlining the first, second and fourth phrases.
 - The leap of a **rising fourth** appears at critical moments – bars 2 and 17, 30³-31, 33⁴-35 and 38³-39.
 - **Falling fifths** act as punctuation marks (bars 15, 26, 28, 46-47).
 - In bars 27-30 the **expansion of the phrase to the octave** C in bar 30 and then to the octave F in bar 31 drives the sense of climax. The top F appears only in bar 31.
- Phrases start in a variety of different ways, matching the contour and meaning of the words, and converge on different versions of the triplet phrase. Notice the variation in the melodic shape of the triplet phrase throughout the song, for example:



Bar 3 repeated falling triplets

Bar 7 inversion: sequential rising triplets

Bar 10 triplets decorate a single note

Bar 29 more sense of upward movement

Bar 32 continuous upward movement

Bar 45 downward and upward balanced

- Fauré's melody is less chromatic than his harmony. In particular, notice that the last 11 bars of the vocal line are diatonic, although there are altered chords and transient modulations in the accompaniment.
- Expressive non-essential notes include:
 - **appoggiaturas**, e.g. bar 4 (C), bar 6 (B flat)
 - **chromatic auxiliary notes**, e.g. bar 5 (B natural), bar 10 (E natural)
 - **chromatic passing note**, – C flat, bar 12 (copied a bar later in the bass line).
 - From bar 38³ to bar 44¹ the final melodic phrase is a **free augmentation** of the opening phrase of the song, suggesting the way in which the singer is trying to cling to his/her dream.

Texture

Melody and accompaniment (melody-dominated homophony) throughout. The consistent single texture reflects the singer's concentration on the dream.

- The three-layered texture is a typically romantic layout, with an upper melody, a middle line providing both harmonic filling and rhythmic momentum, and an underpinning bass line in octaves picking out the broader harmonic rhythm.
- The accompaniment avoids any suggestion of alternative melodic interest, except in bars 39-41, where the vocal melody sustains a C and the accompaniment rises to intensify the crescendo.

Rhythm

- **Simple triple** metre.
- **Continuous quavers** in accompaniment.
- **Slow-moving bass line**, usually one note per bar.
- **Avoids repetitive rhythms** in the vocal line. Each phrase is shaped out of a number of different rhythms.
- **Triplet quavers** towards the ends of all the phrases, with the first of the triplet usually **tied over** from the previous note.

- Phrases in the first verse and most of the second verse start on the first beat of the bar. From bar 26 onwards, phrases start with an **anacrusis**, giving greater rhythmic urgency.
- The cross-rhythm of pairs of quavers against triplets is typical of the period.

Expressive use of rhythm.

The mix of straight quavers and triplets creates a sense of shifting, fluid movement, emphasised by the use of ties. Continuous quavers maintain momentum, while the variety of rhythmic detail in the vocal line follows the nuances of the words.

- Key moments in the text are highlighted by longer notes, particularly the minims in bars 31, 35 and 39-43.
- The harmonic rhythm is mainly one chord per bar, sometimes with a bass movement on the third beat. The faster bass rhythm and harmonic movement in bars 39-42 emphasise the urgency of the singer's plea for the dream to return. Here the bass moves in crotchets, and then in an unevenly accented crotchet–minim rhythm, heightening the impact of the chromatic chord changes.