# Ethereal Light – Program Notes

Ethereal: *adj.* *very light or airy, belonging to the heavens, otherworldly*
Light: *n.* *energy that makes seeing possible, the representation of light or the effect it has in a work of art, God as a source of spiritual illumination*

This afternoon's program features music of the great French composer Gabriel Fauré, as well as a singular work each from the celebrated Sergei Rachmaninoff and the contemporary genius of Morten Lauridsen. Composed during a span of over one hundred years, these divergent works are drawn together by the subject of Light.

In Fauré's *Requiem*, the familiar text from the Catholic Mass for the Dead speaks directly of "eternal light" and "perpetual light," invoked to "shine forever" on those who have died. They are asked to be saved from "utter darkness" and the "darkness of hell," perhaps implying that the unmistakable quality of heaven is Light itself. In the same composer's *Après un Rêve*, the singer wishes to return to the "awakening light" of his dream, now sadly over.

In Lauridsen's masterwork, *Lux Aeterna* (Light Eternal), each of the five movements reference Light in their own way, the opening and closing movements not dissimilarly to the *Requiem* of Fauré. The texts of the inner three movements, all drawn from sacred Latin sources, contain their own unique references to Light, including one of the most celebrative moments in the work which uses the words, "O Lux beatissima" (*O Light most blessed*).

It is in the hearing of today's two works without text – *Pavane* and *Vocalise* – in which perhaps the ear of the listener is most responsible for providing the connection to the theme of Light. Yet how much easier it can often be to hear what music is saying without the encumbrance of words. Additionally it is these two pieces which remind the listener that Light is most effective in the midst of darkness; that indeed without darkness, Light ceases to be Light.

With Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise,* the yearning for Light becomes apparent only in contrast to the permeating darkness of the orchestration and the unfolding harmonic structure. Yet indeed Light is found, both in the iridescent quality of the upper notes of the soprano voice and in the shimmering melody as it finally reaches its apex. Fauré's *Pavane,* with its mesmerizing melodic line, seems to be in perpetual search of Light. As the melody is interchanged between strings and chorus, and as the tonality shifts back and forth from F# minor to A major, it is much like a cloud dancing with the sun; first blocking it, then allowing it to shine.

Light fills all available space. So too do the gleaming sonorities of these three luminous composers.

*There are two ways of spreading light;*
*to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it. ~Edith Wharton*

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Gabriel Fauré *(1845-1924)*

*Pavane*

The foremost French composer of his generation, Gabriel Fauré was born in Pamiers, and trained as an organ master and choir director at the École Niedermeyer in Paris from 1854-1865. Among his teachers were several prominent French musicians including Saint-Saëns (just ten years older than Fauré) who introduced him to the music of such contemporaries as Schumann and Liszt.

When Fauré died at the age of 79, he left behind a legacy of composition that covers an impressive array of mediums; dozens of pieces for piano, a myriad of songs for solo voice, extensive choral writing in both the secular and sacred genres, incidental music for dramatic plays and comedies, and chamber music for solo instrument and orchestra, as well as orchestra suites and sonatas.

Written in 1886, *Pavane* is Fauré's most celebrated work next to his *Requiem*. When Fauré began work on the *Pavane*, he envisioned a purely orchestral work to be played at a series of light summer concerts conducted by

Jules Danbe. But after opting to dedicate the work to his patron Elizabeth, comtesse Greffulhe, Fauré felt compelled to stage a somewhat grander affair, and thus added an invisible chorus to accompany the orchestra, and a text by Robert Montesquiou.

The original choral lyrics were based on some inconsequential verses in the style of Verlaine which spoke of the romantic helplessness of man. From its first performances in 1888, the Pavane enjoyed immense popularity and entered the standard repertoire of the Ballets Russes in 1917. Two of Fauré's pupils – Ravel and Debussy – went on to write well-known pavanes of their own. In an effort to more closely capture Fauré's original intent for the piece, this afternoon's version, though still making use of Fauré's exquisite choral writing, dispenses with the text altogether, creating a mellifluous vocalise for choir, which captures the glowing beauty of this mesmerizing work without the distraction of a superfluous text. This is the premiere performance by the NSCS.

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*Après un Rêve*

Though Fauré actually wrote few large-scale works, he is widely regarded as the greatest master of French song. Before penning the bolder, more powerful instrumental works of his later years, he wrote numerous songs with texts of varied themes which he often set to either sprightly melodies and rhythms, or melancholy ones, as befitted the texts to which he was drawn. Being engaged as he was throughout the majority of the year with duties as teacher and church organist, most of his song writing had to be done during summer holidays.

Although *Après un Rêve* is one of Fauré's earliest songs (1877), it is unquestionably his most popular. The first of his *Trois melodies*, Op. 7, which also include *Hymne* (Op.7, No. 2) and *Barcarolle* (Op. 7, No. 3), it has been transcribed for several solo instruments including piano, yet remains best known in its intended form; as a song for solo voice.

The dreamy, languid, and richly expressive melodic line of *Après un Rêve* is set to words by Romain Bussine. The text – a French adaptation of an anonymous Italian poem – describes a dream of a lover's romantic rendezvous of an almost otherworldly kind, away from darkness, and toward an awakening light. But the dreamer, now awake, longs to return to the mysterious night.

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*Requiem*

Like so many French composers, Fauré was a church organist and choirmaster. Yet despite the composer's long association with the church, his religious sincerity has been questioned. To be frank, it is widely believed that he was not a devout person. Emil Vuillermoz – a French critic and one-time composition student of Fauré – says he was an agnostic, and that his *Requiem* is "the work of a disbeliever who respects the belief of others."

Like many composers of all nationalities, Fauré was also a teacher of music, and taught at the Conservatoire in Paris. Among his distinguished pupils were Ravel, Koechlin, and Nadia Boulanger, herself a famous conductor, and teacher of both a mentor and student of this writer.

Though Fauré is said to have begun work on his *Requiem* "purely for the pleasure of it" in 1887, it is doubtless that the death of both his parents – Fauré's father died in 1885, his mother, two years later – had an impact on him and his composing. In setting the requiem text, Fauré omitted most of the *Dies Irae*, the terrible description of judgment day, and selected instead passages of hope and comfort, not unlike Brahms in his *A German Requiem*. It concludes with the antiphon "In Paradisum" which is not part of the requiem mass. It is as if his intent is to comfort the bereaved rather than terrify them.

Like many large-scale works, Fauré's *Requiem* has gone through several metamorphoses. The "first version," completed in 1888, consisted of five moments, and continued to be performed as such until the end of the century, though Fauré also prepared an "expanded" version for grander occasions. Presented first in 1893, this version added two extra movements; the *Offertoire* (written in 1889 and calling for a baritone solo) and the *Libera Me* (written in 1877 and originally intended as an independent composition for baritone and organ). It was for this 1893 performance that Fauré is also said to have added certain brass instrumentation.

Yet a third version of the *Requiem* – published for full orchestra – received its premiere in July of 1900 during the Paris World Exhibition. Though there is some speculation as to how this third version came to be, it is believed to have been Fauré's publisher Hamelle who suggested the expansion of the orchestra to secure more performances by turning the *Requiem* into a full concert work.

Whatever version is heard, and whatever attitude toward religion Fauré may have had, few would argue that his *Requiem* is a work of extreme beauty and tranquility. Since its premiere in 1888, it has been performed widely in various forms in both concert halls and churches, becoming – perhaps in part due to the absence of extreme technical difficulties, in addition to its musical appeal – a favorite of musicians and audiences alike. Today's performance – the first by the NSCS in twenty years – is based on an edition by John Rutter which uses Fauré's original chamber instrumentation, more clearly features Fauré's first instrumental love – the church organ – and is undeniably less of a departure from what Fauré described in an 1888 letter to his friend Paul Poujaud as his "petite *Requiem*".

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Sergei Rachmaninoff *(1873-1943)*

*Vocalise (Op. 34 No. 14)*

Sergei Rachmaninoff was born in northwestern Russia to two amateur pianists. He began his own study of the instrument at the age of four. Despite the fact he was found early on to be quite lazy and failed most of his classes in school, he would grow to become one of the finest pianists of his day.

Although Rachmaninoff established himself as a respected and popular conductor in addition to his piano skills, he remains most renowned for his compositional work, for which he showed an early aptitude. Today he is regarded as the last great representative of Russian late Romanticism. He was largely influenced by the compositions of both Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, though such influence gradually gave way to his own distinctive voice, marked by pronounced lyricism, expressive line and lush orchestral color. His compositional skill is most marked, perhaps, by a striking gift for melody and its development. He wrote extensive work for his beloved pianoforte – both as a solo instrument and with orchestra – as well as chamber music, songs, choral music and opera.

After several early successes in composition, Rachmaninoff suffered a setback with severe depression, resulting in a three-year period during which he wrote virtually no music. Then in 1900 he met a psychologist named Nikolai Dahl – himself an amateur musician – who practiced an early form of auto-suggestion. He made Rachmaninoff repeat over and over the words, "You will begin to write a concerto. You will work with great facility. The concerto will be of excellent quality."

The treatment continued for many months and Rachmaninoff began to recover both his confidence and his creative ability. With his writer's block completely overcome in 1901, he finished his Piano Concerto No. 2 (Op. 18), which was performed in Moscow (and, incidentally, dedicated to Dr. Dahl) to great acclaim. Today it is possibly the best loved piano concerto by concertgoers the world over.

Published in 1912 – three years after his first tour of the United States as pianist but nine years before purchasing his first home here – his *Vocalise* is the final of his *Fourteen Songs*, Op. 34. It is written for soprano (though occasionally also sung by tenor) and uses no words, but rather a vowel (or vowels) of the singer's choosing. The piece has been transcribed for various solo instruments and for orchestra alone, and remains one of the most familiar and beautiful melodies of his creation. Rachmaninoff dedicated it to the Ukrainian lyric-coloratura soprano Antonina Nezhdanova, who gave the premiere performance of the *Vocalise* with the composer conducting.

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Morten Lauridsen *(b. 1943)*

*Lux Aeterna*

Morten Johannes Lauridsen was born in Colfax, Washington on February 27, 1943 – thirty-one days before Rachmaninoff's death – and raised in Portland, Oregon. As a young boy Lauridsen developed a love for music as he listened to his mother playing jazz piano and singing to him. At age eight he started playing piano and a few years later, learned to play the trumpet.

He first attended Whitman College where, yet unsure of his call to a life in music, he studied English and History. During that summer he worked as a Forest Service firefighter and lookout on an isolated tower near Mt. St. Helens. It was there he did a good deal of "self-examination" and decided he really did belong in music, though yet unsure in what capacity. After another year at Whitman, where he took "every music class he could lay his hands on", he transferred to the University of Southern California, where he studied advanced composition with Ingolf Dahl, Halsey Stevens, Robert Linn and Harold Owen.

Currently considered America's greatest contemporary composer of choral music, Morten Lauridsen has become one of the most performed living composers in the country. His works have been recorded on more than a hundred CDs, three of which have received Grammy nominations. He is the recipient of numerous grants, prizes and commissions, and in November of 2007 was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Bush, citing his "compositions of radiant choral works combining musical beauty, power, and spiritual depth that have thrilled audiences worldwide."

In his book, *Choral Music in the Twentieth Century*, musicologist and conductor Nick Strimple describes Lauridsen as "the only American composer in history who can be called a mystic, [whose] probing, serene work contains an elusive and indefinable ingredient which leaves the impression that all the questions have been answered."

Though he has also written a great deal of chamber music and solo piano music, Lauridsen's first love is song; a natural partner to his second love, poetry. Not unlike Fauré, much of Lauridsen's composing is done during the summer months. He has said that while at his summer home on a remote island off the coast of Washington, he is "able to commune with a greater sense and greater being." It was there he finished the *Lux Aeterna*, writing the final movement in the summer of 1996.

*Lux Aeterna* received its premier performance in 1997 by the Los Angeles Master Chorale under the direction of Paul Salamunovich. It is a "non-liturgical requiem" despite the opening and closing movements (*Introitus* and *Agnus Dei-Lux Aeterna*), which are taken from the traditional Catholic Mass for the Dead. The themes of the texts for the middle three movements are more Trinitarian (*Te Deum*, God the Father; *O nata lux*, God the Son; *Veni sancte spiritus*, God the Holy Spirit) and are all drawn from sacred Latin sources, each containing references to Light. At the close of the final movement, the composer adds a joyful *Alleluia* "tag" before the seven-fold *Amen* brings the listener back once more to the reflective quietness with which the work began.

Mr. Lauridsen has said his intention for the work was that it be an "intimate work of quiet serenity," using texts which express "hope, reassurance, faith and illumination in all of its manifestations." In choosing texts for his music, he looks for poems that have universal themes, and explains why he has received vast amounts of mail on the *Lux Aeterna*; "…because every one of the five movements relates to light, a universal symbol in so many ways. It was a great deal of pleasure to write. I wrote it as my mother was in the process of dying, so it was a way of, as so many artists do, of dealing with that kind of a situation in an artistic way."

The result is a choral masterwork of uncommon richness and complexity, of beauty and serenity. It is at once contemporary and traditional – current and timeless, and in this writers opinion, will continue to be performed and heard as long as there are musicians and audiences. This afternoon the NSCS performs this work for the first time.

*Someday perhaps the inner light will shine forth from us,*
*and then we'll need no other light. ~Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*