

# EVENT FOUR

Saturday 14 September 2024 7.30pm  
Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, University of York

CONCERT BY FESTIVAL ARTISTS

Ben Hancox, Magnus Johnston (Violins)

Gary Pomeroy, Simone van der Giessen (Violas)

Marie Bitloch, Tim Lowe (Cellos)

Andrew Brownell (Piano)

YORK  
CHAMBER  
MUSIC  
FESTIVAL  
2024

Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

*Prélude* to the Cantata *La Damoiselle élue*  
(*The Blessed Damozel*)

Debussy was interested in the symbolist movement which emerged during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in France and Belgium as a reaction against realism in art; a depiction of what is in front of the eye without idealization or the distortions of Romanticism. Symbolism grew as a reaction against this by attempting to represent absolute truths symbolically through language and metaphorical images. The style originated with the publication in 1857 of Baudelaire's book of poetry *Les Fleurs du mal*. Debussy read an anthology of English poetry translated by Gabriel Sarrazin, "Poètes modernes d'Angleterre" (1883). This gave him the idea of composing a cantata on the poem *The Blessed Damozel* (1850) by Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Debussy read the poem but probably did not see Rossetti's famous painting of the same name but will have seen other pre-Raphaelite illustrations with a focus on 'a new type of feminine beauty'.



Dante Gabriel Rossetti  
*The Blessed Damozel* (1878)

Debussy's idea was to compose a short cantata based on *The Blessed Damozel*. The synopsis is simple. From the heights of paradise, leaning on a golden barrier, a young girl laments the absence of her lover. On Earth, the latter believes he feels her presence (*Du haut du paradis, une jeune fille se lamente sur l'absence de son amant. Sur Terre, ce dernier croit sentir sa presence*). He completed the piece in 1888 saying that he wanted to compose "a little oratorio in a little pagan mystical note".

It was the first of Debussy's works for orchestra to be performed. The premiere was a success, and music critic Pierre Lalo wrote about it, "Such are the grace and delicacy of his taste that all his audacities are welcome". The piece already shows Debussy's wonderful gift for fleeting moments of sensuality.

In many ways this piece is a harbinger of Debussy's later masterpiece *Prélude* (1894) inspired by the symbolist poet Mallarmé's beautiful poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*, depicting the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon finally succumbing to dreams of possession in universal Nature. The great composer and conductor Pierre Boulez considered the score of *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* to be the beginning of modern music, observing that "the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music."

The earlier *Prélude*, to *La Damoiselle élue*, is beautifully arranged for piano and strings by John Lenehan.

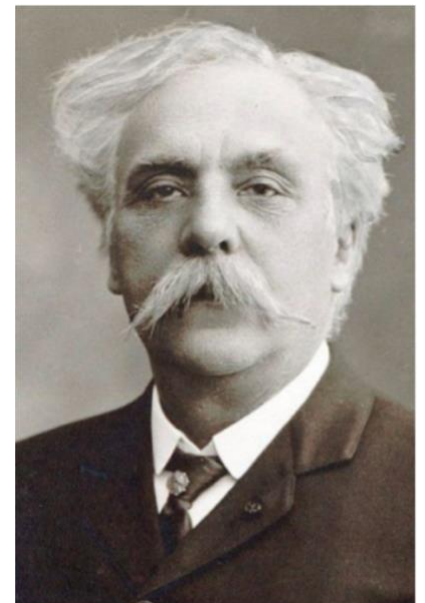
### **Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924)** **String Quartet in E minor, op121**

*Allegro moderato*

*Andante*

*Allegro*

Fauré's busy early professional career, notably as organist at the Église de la Madeleine, allowed little time for composition and even when in middle age he began in earnest his music was not at first widely accepted, except perhaps in Britain where he had many admirers (Frank Bridge was influenced by Fauré). There is no doubting that in his later period Fauré created some of the most beautiful and intense chamber music in the repertoire. His musical ethic became more mystical and serious, much more so than his reputation for writing charming music might suggest. As he wrote:



*"To imagine is to express the wish for everything that surpasses reality. Music exists to elevate us as high as possible above that which is. I bear within myself a sure desire for that which does not exist."*

For anyone less spiritually centred than Fauré these final years would have been a time of frustration as his physical body failed – he was a heavy smoker and suffered as a result and also became functionally deaf. Due to his deafness he never heard his powerful stage work *Penelope* or any of his late chamber music, sharing with Beethoven a composer's worst fate. But with both men their spirit soared above it all and with Fauré what grips one immediately about the string quartet is its spiritual maturity. The quartet was his last composition. That he had not attempted to write in this medium despite being such a prolific composer of chamber music suggests a certain reticence in the face of the weight of the

legacy of Haydn, Mozart and especially Beethoven. In a letter to his wife he wrote "I've started a Quartet for strings, without piano. This is a genre which Beethoven in particular made famous, and causes all those who are not Beethoven to be terrified."

Nevertheless, Fauré poured out a lifetime of experience in his quartet. He was a quiet man with a reverence for the past but his harmonic and melodic innovations became very influential and alongside his pupil Ravel, Debussy and others he created a distinct French 'new school'. That he holds Beethoven in especially high esteem is evident in the Preface he wrote in Joseph de Marliave's book on Beethoven's string quartets, personally shouldering the "sad and honoured privilege" of writing about the work of a genius whose musical output was cut too short. He is sad at what might have been had Beethoven lived to be Fauré's own age of seventy-nine years. These remarks were written for De Marliave in April 1924 a few months before the completion of his own string quartet in September. His expression of regret is especially poignant because in early November Fauré himself died of pneumonia.

When Fauré was director of the Paris Conservatoire (from 1905 to 1920) he customarily left Paris for several weeks at the end of the academic year to compose in quiet resorts. After his retirement he continued to retreat from Paris for bouts of sustained composition. The quartet was composed at Annecy-le-Vieux, back in Paris and finished in Divonne-les-Bains between September 1923 and September 1924. He worked long hours to complete the work and this may have contributed to his demise. He declined an offer to hear the piece due to his terribly distorted hearing.

The centre of gravity of the quartet is the long second movement *Andante* around which the two outer movements are spun and imbues them with an otherworldly calm that pervades the whole work. It is the reason why the quartet only has three movements. He wrote the *Andante* while on vacation at Annecy-le-Vieux with the two outer movements written later. So in a very real spiritual sense it is the heart and soul of the work. The Fauré scholar Jean-Michel Nectoux said of the second movement, "The *Andante* is one of the finest pieces of string quartet writing. From start to finish it bathes in a supernatural light. There is nothing that is not beautiful in this movement with its subtle variations of light-play, a sort of white upon white. ... The sublime music sinks out of sight, where it carries on, rather than seeming to come to an end".

The quartet references several of the composer's earlier melodies, notably themes from an unfinished violin concerto (Op. 14). These youthful themes are recycled into the quartet with the sagacity born of a lengthy composing career. It is further evidence that Fauré was in reflective mood. The first and third movements by contrast to the free structure of the *Andante* are based on

traditional sonata form. The last movement combines the functions of scherzo and finale.

The work has been described as an intimate meditation on the last things, "an extraordinary work by any standards, ethereal and other-worldly with themes that seem constantly to be drawn skywards." Fauré must have sensed the imminence of his death so the string quartet is surly a quiet, poignant and profound farewell. He speaks to us in the freedom of this knowledge, liberated from all pretence, fully aware of the radical quartets of Debussy and Ravel but imbued by the great tradition of French chamber music.

Fauré's string quartet is a unique creation in the French chamber music canon but more than this he shares with us his serenity in the face of his own struggles – deafness and ill-health – and as he moves towards the end of life. Surely, above all, this quartet is a great gift to all of us.

## INTERVAL

### **Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897)** **Piano Quartet in G Minor, Op. 25**

*Allegro*

*Intermezzo. Allegro, ma non troppo*

*Andante con moto*

*Rondo all Zingarese. Presto*

In his late twenties, Brahms made his first professional visit to Vienna armed with introductions from Clara Schumann and other supporters. Included in his recitals and concerts of his own music was the Piano Quartet in G Minor one of the first works of his flowering. It is a work of huge proportions and despite its quite congenial surface has an inner story. As a result of its length and intensity it was somewhat critically received but its popularity continued to grow as Brahms became known as perhaps the quintessential master of Romantic chamber music. The quartet refers back to Schubert, possibly Brahms's favourite composer, so at one level the work appears to have a looseness and charm redolent of the great Viennese master whose late music was still relatively unknown. Underneath, however, the looseness is deceptive because the piano quartet is built on themes and textures that do not hang easily together. Everything is constructed on thematic material that is without precedent in chamber music. Schoenberg describes this method of composition as preparing the way for atonality, in the sense that the whole only makes sense when all the material is heard in reference to itself. While other contemporaries, notably Wagner, were blazing a futuristic trail on the grand scale Brahms also spoke in



epic proportions on the chamber music canvass with a clarity and newness that had not been heard before.

The first movement has a warm gentleness about it but it also simmers with a darker, more introspective side. It features an extended exposition introducing three themes. Beginning what became a personal trademark, the development starts with the first theme unaltered; the recapitulation is somewhat abbreviated after the huge proportion of the exposition. Another innovation in this quartet is that Brahms follows on with a scherzo-like second movement although he retitled it *Intermezzo* (*Allegro ma non troppo; Trio, animato*) because of its somewhat subdued and searching character; large in scale but with a mysterious quality explored mostly in the strings. The Andante third movement has a dreamy grandness, which suggests a scale almost orchestral in its feeling. The fourth movement, Rondo alla Zingarese – Presto, is Brahms's first sally into Gypsy music. His Hungarian violinist friend, Josef Joachim, declared it an accurate imitation of the Hungarian folk idiom, and the breathless conclusion is some of his most exciting music.