

Program Notes: Lamentations

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

GABRIEL FAURÉ

(Born May 12, 1845, Pamiers, Ariège; died November 4, 1924, Paris)

Élégie for Cello and Piano, op. 24

Composed: 1880

Published: 1883

Dedication: Jules Loëb

First performance: December 15, 1883

Other works from this period: Piano Quartet no. 1 in c minor, op. 15 (1876–1879); *Berceuse* in D Major for Violin and Piano, op. 16 (1879); Impromptu no. 1 in E-flat Major for Solo Piano, op. 25 (1881)

Approximate duration: 7 minutes

The compact frame of Gabriel Fauré's *Élégie*, op. 24—its brevity, intimate scoring, and frank designation as an elegy—belies its expressive range. The work seems to honor grief as a multifaceted thing and depicts it as such: not prosaically, according to the classic stages of denial, anger, and so on, but in more poetical fashion. Herein lies Fauré's mastery. He possesses the sensibility to probe, with economy and exquisite subtlety, the depth of human emotion, giving graceful voice to our innermost feelings.

The *Élégie*, cast in the somber key of c minor, begins with a mournful cello melody, paced by a solemn procession of chords in the piano. The theme's melodic contour traces a slow descent, as if insisting on its own dignity as it approaches its nadir. A contrasting middle section modulates to A-flat major, but the music retains its melancholia, as if offering a tearful remembrance of better times. A sudden anguished eruption heralds the return of the opening melody, transformed now from a somber dirge to a piercing cry. The piano spins a flurry of thirty-second-note triplets; the cello proclaims the theme in its keening upper register, *fortissimo con grandezza*.

Fauré completed the *Élégie* in the same month as his First Piano Quartet, also in c minor. The *Élégie* was projected to be the slow movement of a multimovement cello sonata. It was first heard at a salon hosted by Camille Saint-Saëns. Fauré wrote to his publisher, Julien Hamelle: "I was very sorry you could not be at Saint-Saëns's on Monday. My cello piece was excellently received, which greatly encourages me to go on and do the whole sonata." The *Élégie* received its public premiere in December 1883, at the Société Nationale, featuring the cellist (and the work's dedicatee) Jules Loëb.

Though the original plans for a larger cello sonata were abandoned, the *Élégie*'s popular success prompted a string of similar chamber miniatures, including Fauré's *Papillon* (ca. 1885) and *Romance* for Cello and Piano (1894); the *Andante* for Violin and Piano (1897); and the *Fantaisie* for Flute and Piano (1898). Such works consolidated the small-form emotive immediacy that would become Fauré's trademark. Later in his career, Fauré did produce two cello sonatas; the second sonata's *Andante* movement audibly echoes the *Élégie*'s doleful character. The *Élégie*'s popularity also led Fauré to prepare a version for cello and orchestra in 1896.

ERNEST BLOCH

(Born July 24, 1880, Geneva; died July 15, 1959, Portland, Oregon)

Nigun (Improvisation) from Baal Shem: Three Pictures of Hassidic Life for Violin and Piano

Composed: 1923

Dedication: "To the memory of my mother"

Other works from this period: *In the Night* for Orchestra (1922); Piano Quintet no. 1 (1921–1923); *Méditation hébraïque* for Cello and Piano

(1924); *Nuit exotique* for Violin and Piano (1924); Sonata no. 2 for Violin and Piano, *Poème mystique* (1924)

Approximate duration: 6 minutes

For the Swiss-born American composer Ernest Bloch, cultural and artistic identity were intrinsically linked. Bloch, born in Geneva in 1880 to Jewish parents, found his musical voice in a series of large-scale works known as his "Jewish cycle." These included Psalm settings for voice and orchestra (1912–1914); *Israel*, a symphony with five vocal soloists (1912–1916); and his most famous work, *Schelomo* for Cello and Orchestra (1915–1916). "What interests me is the Jewish soul," Bloch wrote, "the enigmatic, ardent, turbulent soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible...it is all this that I endeavor to hear in myself and transcribe in my music; the venerable emotion of the race that slumbers way down in our souls." (G. Schirmer would publish the "Jewish" works emblazoned with a Star of David, placing the composer's initials in the center—thus affirming Bloch's cultural identity in the public consciousness, as well.)

Following the "Jewish cycle," Bloch's oeuvre would continue to nod to the composer's Jewish heritage. In 1923 came *Baal Shem: Three Pictures of Hassidic Life* for Violin and Piano. Bloch composed the work in memoriam his deceased mother.

The second piece in the *Baal Shem* triptych is titled *Nigun*—literally, "improvisation," or "melody." Per Kabbalah, melody represents a spiritual medium, empowering the faithful to achieve a state of transcendence; song is consequently a vital component of Hassidic worship. Bloch's *Nigun* captures this reverence for song in its oratorical violin writing.

The work begins on a dramatically charged note; Bloch instructs both pianist and violinist to play *fieramente* ("fiercely"). Harmonic gestures and melodic flourishes immediately evoke Jewish folk music—many ears will quickly detect the telltale grace notes and augmented seconds in the work's opening measures. Above rumbling *tremolandi* in the piano, the violin intones its first utterance like a cantor calling the faithful to prayer. Here, as throughout *Nigun*, the violin conjures a vocal expressivity with its semi-improvisatory melodic character, its rhythmic freedom, and, on its first entrance, the composer's instruction that the violinist play on the fourth (lowest) string, coloring the tune with an especially dusky quality.

These features permeate the entire work, which reverberates from start to finish with a take-no-prisoners dramatic power. As the work proceeds, the violinist's melodic ornamentation, **double-stopped** melodic figures, and increasingly virtuosic flourishes seem to approach religious ecstasy. After its most fervent declamation, *Nigun* ends with a meditative amen.

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

(Born March 9/21, 1839, Karevo, Pskov district, Russia; died March 16/28, 1881, St. Petersburg)

Pesni i plyaski smerti (Songs and Dances of Death) for Voice and Piano

Composed: Nos. 1–3: 1875; No. 4: 1877

Published: 1882 (ed. Rimsky-Korsakov)

Other works from this period: *Pictures from an Exhibition* for Solo Piano (1874); *Neponyatnaya (The Misunderstood One)* (song) (1875); *Sorochintsi Fair* (opera) (1874–1880); *Five Russian Folk Songs* for Male Voices (1880)

Approximate duration: 19 minutes

Modest Mussorgsky was, with Mily Balakirev (with whom he studied informally for a time), César Cui, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and Aleksandr

*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

Borodin, one of the five composers known collectively as “the Mighty Handful” (also called “the Five”), a group that sought to create a distinctly Russian musical aesthetic. Musicologist and Mussorgsky scholar Robert Oldani moreover credits him as “the most strikingly individual Russian composer of the later nineteenth century and an avatar of modernism for the generation of Debussy and Ravel.” The repertoire indeed bears witness to these latter composers’ fascination with Mussorgsky, whose most famous composition, *Pictures from an Exhibition*, is equally well-known in Ravel’s orchestration as in the original version for solo piano.

Mussorgsky most excelled in the composition of opera and song. In these arenas, he developed a technique of vocal writing at once lyrical and true to the cadence of inflection of Russian speech. These qualities are nowhere in stronger evidence than in the starkly intense *Songs and Dances of Death*.

This cycle of four songs sets texts by the Russian poet (and Mussorgsky’s distant relative) Arseny Golenishchev-Kutuzov. Each poem personifies Death entering a mundane scenario to claim a new victim; befitting such a morbid subject matter, Mussorgsky’s music is unrelentingly dark.

The set begins with a mother’s worried lullaby to her sick child. Haunting, chromatic piano lines, punctuated by pregnant silences, set the sleepless scene: “A child moans. A candle, burning low, Casts a dim light...” Death appears in the form of a babysitter, offering to relieve the tired mother: “You’re weary, from weeping, grieving, and loving. I’ll keep watch for you. You failed to calm your child. But I’ll sing more sweetly than you.” The music becomes harried as the mother anxiously resists—“Away, evil one! Your caress will kill my joy.” Her entreaties are for naught: Death finally reassures her, “See, he’s been lulled by my quiet song.”

In the second song of the cycle, Death masquerades as a lover serenading a dying young woman from outside her window. Mussorgsky signals this serenade’s morbidity without delay: the song begins with an eerie single bell toll. The subsequent lilting piano accompaniment, while gentle, is shaded by ghostly harmonies. The music turns gallant as Death sings: “In the darkness of cruel bondage, your youth is fading...I will stifle you in my strong embrace. Hear my murmurs of love—Be still...you are mine!”

The following song takes the form of a *trepak*, a traditional Ukrainian folk dance. Here, an old peasant drunkard is caught in a blizzard. Death invites him to dance. From the opening measures, the ominous piano accompaniment warns of what lies ahead, accenting the song’s opening strain with an allusion to the *Dies irae* plainchant melody from the Latin Mass for the Dead (“The day of wrath, that day will dissolve the world in ashes...”).

The music turns jaunty as Death sings into the peasant’s ear: “Poor old peasant, you drank yourself blind and took to the road. But an old witch of a blizzard blustered up, suddenly driving you from field to deep forest... Lie down, take cover, fall asleep.” Spiraling turbulence in the piano, driven by quick chromatic runs, reflects the rising inclemency of the storm as Death claims the old peasant.

The Field Marshall, the cycle’s final number, is also its most vigorous. Marked *Vivo—alla guerra*, the song portrays Death as a commanding military officer. At the song’s climax, Death, surveying the battlefield, triumphantly sings, “The battle is over! I have conquered all! You have all made peace before me, warriors! Life made you enemies, but I have united you!”

Songs and Dances of Death also exists in a later orchestral version, prepared by Rimsky-Korsakov and Aleksandr Glazunov.

SERGEI RACHMANINOV

(Born March 20/April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia; died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills, California)

Trio élégiaque in d minor for Piano, Violin, and Cello, op. 9

Composed: 1893, rev. 1907, 1917

Published: 1894, rev. 1907

Dedication: In memory of Tchaikovsky

First performance: January 31, 1894, with the composer at the piano

Other works from this period: Romance in G Major for Piano, Four Hands (1893); Suite no. 1 in g minor for Two Pianos, *Fantaisie-tableaux* (1893); Symphony no. 1 in d minor, op. 13 (lost) (1895); *Moments musicaux* for Solo Piano, op. 16 (1896)

Approximate duration: 46 minutes

In 1893, Tchaikovsky—revered then, as now, as Russia’s greatest composer—heard the twenty-year-old Sergei Rachmaninov’s orchestral fantasy *Utyos (The Rock)*. Impressed by the work, Tchaikovsky offered to conduct *The Rock* the following season. The occasion never materialized; Tchaikovsky died later that fall.

Sixty thousand mourners applied for tickets to attend Tchaikovsky’s funeral at St. Petersburg’s Kazan Cathedral, which seats six thousand. Rachmaninov joined his compatriots in grieving their country’s loss, paying singular tribute with his *Trio élégiaque* in d minor, op. 9.

The trio is an epic *tombeau* to Russia’s towering musical figure, bespeaking an epic sadness. It is the second of Rachmaninov’s two piano trios, both titled *Trio élégiaque*. The first is a fifteen-minute work reflecting the young composer’s brooding imagination; Rachmaninov completed it over a four-day burst of creative energy. The second trio, though still the work of a young man, marks a personal response to a deeply felt loss; it comes across as a wholly mature work, despite being composed in just Rachmaninov’s twentieth year. Rachmaninov labored over the d minor Trio for six weeks.

Befitting a tribute from a rising young composer to a revered master, the *Trio élégiaque* is modeled after Tchaikovsky’s own Piano Trio, itself dedicated “to the memory of a great artist,” the pianist and conductor Nikolai Rubinstein. Like Tchaikovsky’s trio, the *Trio élégiaque* comprises three imposing movements: a large-scale sonata-form first movement, a set of variations, and a resolute finale. Each trio also casts the piano as its center of gravity, though this is likewise a signature of Rachmaninov’s oeuvre at large. Indeed, just as it nods to Tchaikovsky, the *Trio élégiaque* strongly exhibits Rachmaninov’s artistic individuality.

The *Moderato* first movement begins with a funereal piano figure, marked by an obsessive descending four-note chromatic motif. The cello and violin issue stone-faced melodic utterances in turn. This opening procession gradually builds to feverish intensity. Following a slow transition, the second theme appears. Marked *Allegro moderato*, this music begins with the vitality of a folk dance—

Allegro moderato (♩ = 104)

The musical score is for the first movement of Rachmaninov's *Trio élégiaque*, marked *Allegro moderato* (♩ = 104). It features three staves: Violin (Vln.), Cello (Vc.), and Piano (Pno.). The Violin and Cello parts are in the upper staves, and the Piano part is in the lower staff. The Violin and Cello parts feature a descending chromatic motif, while the Piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The tempo is marked as *Allegro moderato* with a quarter note equal to 104 beats per minute.

—but quickly escalates to an impassioned cry, fueled by clanging chords in the piano and furious repeated sixteenth-note figures in the strings. The outburst subsides and yields to a radiant new musical idea: against the backdrop of a shimmering piano accompaniment, the cello and violin

present long-breathed melodic lines, derived from the folk-like second theme's anapestic (short-short-long) **motif**.

Allegro moderato (♩ = 104)

Vc.

Pno.

p

un poco cresc.

cresc.

From here, through the subsequent development and recapitulation, the movement might be heard to traverse the stages of grief (prefiguring the oft-cited Kübler-Ross model—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—whose conception postdates the work by several decades). If this gleaming music to close the exposition shows the bereaved in denial, what follows is surely anger. The piano thereafter transforms the second theme into a thing of radiant beauty, as if in avoidance of the prevailing grief.

Meno mosso (♩ = 66)

p

The bargaining is perhaps also reflected in Rachmaninov's fragmentation and transfiguration of the movement's primary melodic materials and modulation from key to key. After a cadenza-like passage in the piano, depression sets in: the development's final *Andante* passage is quiet and forlorn. The movement ends with an aggrieved acceptance, as the piano icily reprises the opening theme, accompanied now by muted strings.

The second movement presents eight variations on a theme from *The Rock*, the orchestral work of Rachmaninov's that Tchaikovsky was to conduct. The piano presents the poignant theme: a naïve, heartfelt lullaby or perhaps a hymn. The *Allegro* first variation turns bright and optimistic as the strings issue a flowing melody above a quietly bubbling piano accompaniment. The freely musing second variation is set again in the piano alone: grandiose chords punctuate wandering, semi-improvisatory melodic elaborations. The puckish energy of the third variation, marked *Allegro scherzando*, evokes Mendelssohn's trademark *Midsummer Night's Dream* scherzo style.

The fourth variation casts the third in sharp relief, answering the devilish piano runs and pizzicato chords with muted strings, like a warm halo around a cherubic series of chords in the piano. The strings remain muted in the fifth variation, as the cello takes the melody, turning the theme into a rustic tune.

Following the *Allegro vivace* sixth variation—a refreshing sea breeze, buoyed by sweeping triplets in the piano—the seventh variation turns moribund. This music nods askance to the first movement's dour opening: violin and cello join in a plaintive duet. The piano offers only periodic interjections, as if to emphasize the music's sudden barrenness. The cello, **cantando**, begins the final variation, bringing the theme closer still to the trio's opening. Augmented seconds hint at Jewish folk music. Finally, the variations come to a serene close.

The trio's final movement begins with a muscular piano introduction—big, bravura chords that herald Rachmaninov's *concertante* writing for the piano throughout the movement. The ensemble steadily builds to the finale's dramatic climax before the devastating denouement: a haunting remembrance of the music that began the trio, now with strings in octaves and the piano in fuller voice. What had begun as a somber funeral procession reappears as the work's most intense outpouring of sadness. These final cries abate: violin and cello replace their mutes, and the piano ends the piece on a pianississimo d minor chord. After the *Trio élégiaque's* fiercest roar comes its most overpowering moment: a deafening final silence.