

## Program Notes for VSO Concert –Berg Violin Concerto & Fauré Requiem – November 7-9, 2025

By Jonathan Berkowitz

### ALBAN BERG (1885 to 1935)

The term “twelve-tone method” likely brings three names to mind: Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg. Just as the three B’s—Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms—were giants of the Classical period, the three A’s—Arnold, Anton, and Alban—were a trio of composers of the Second Viennese School who profoundly shaped the course of 20<sup>th</sup>-century music.

Berg was born in 1885 in Vienna, at a time when the city was a dazzling, contradictory hub of art, philosophy, politics, and music. Home to Gustav Mahler, Sigmund Freud, and Arnold Schoenberg, it was there where Romanticism and modernism collided. Berg came from a well-to-do, cultured family that nurtured his artistic inclinations. His childhood was marked by a love of literature, and a relatively late discovery of music as his central calling. Berg began composing as a teenager, largely self-taught, writing songs influenced by the lush late-Romantic idiom of Brahms, Wagner, and Hugo Wolf. His early music already displayed the melodic sensitivity and harmonic richness that would remain hallmarks of his mature style.

At nineteen, Berg met Arnold Schoenberg who was sufficiently impressed with the youth’s manuscripts to accept him as a pupil for formal composition studies. Schoenberg was developing a new, radical harmonic language that stretched and eventually broke the boundaries of tonality. He would become the single most important influence on Berg’s artistic life. Under Schoenberg’s guidance, Berg learned rigorous counterpoint and advanced compositional techniques. Additionally, Schoenberg fostered a spirit of intellectual freedom in his students.

While Schoenberg was the intellectual and technical architect of twelve-tone (dodecaphonic) composition, Berg emerged as its most lyrical and emotionally direct voice. Where Schoenberg and Webern were often austere, Berg infused the modern idiom with Romantic warmth and expressive clarity. Berg’s early works reflect this tension between traditional expressivity and radical innovation. His *Seven Early Songs* combine Mahler-like orchestral colour with a harmonic language already pushing toward atonality. An early masterpiece, *String Quartet, Op. 3 (1910)*, signaled Berg’s arrival as an original composer.

Marrying Helene Nahowski in 1911 placed Berg at the intersection of Vienna’s bourgeois and aristocratic circles. Helene came from a prominent family and, despite some early opposition from her parents, the marriage gave Berg both stability and a strong advocate for his music. The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 put Berg into a depression, unable to actively serve his country in the field due to uncertain health and unable to concentrate on his music.

The decisive turning point in Berg’s career came with *Wozzeck*, his first opera. He discovered the play *Woyzeck* by Georg Büchner in 1914 and was struck by its raw portrayal of a soldier crushed by poverty, violence, and madness. Berg worked on the opera during and after his military service, completing it in 1922. The opera uses atonal and expressionist techniques but is carefully structured: each scene is based on a precise musical form (such as a passacaglia or fugue). When *Wozzeck* premiered in 1925 in Berlin, it caused a sensation. Some were shocked by its harsh subject matter and dissonant language; others hailed it as a modern masterpiece. It remains one of

the cornerstones of 20<sup>th</sup>-century opera, a fusion of Berg's deep sense of drama and humanity with Schoenberg's technique. This single work lifted Berg from comparative obscurity to international fame. In the final decade of his life Berg produced only a handful of works but was active as a teacher and writer about music.

The rising tide of antisemitism and Nazi ideology meant that even an association with someone Jewish could lead to denunciation. Berg's connection to the Jewish Arnold Schoenberg severely restricted opportunities for Berg's work to be performed in Germany. His music and that of the other twelve-tone composers was banned and put on the list of "degenerate" music. Another major blow to Berg was Schoenberg's enforced immigration to the United States.

Exhausted and ailing after finishing his *Violin Concerto*, Berg travelled to the countryside to rest before resuming work on his second opera *Lulu*. An insect bite led to an infection and blood poisoning. He died in Vienna on Christmas Eve 1935 at the age of 50.

He did not complete his second opera, *Lulu*, a psychological portrait and critique of a morally decaying society between the wars. It was first performed in incomplete form in 1937, Berg's wife having imposed a ban on any attempt to finish the final act. After she died, Friedrich Cerha completed Berg's sketches, and a fully orchestrated version was finally heard in 1979. Today, *Lulu* stands alongside *Wozzeck* as one of the great modern operas.

Alban Berg's life was a bridge between two worlds: the late Romantic Vienna of Mahler and Brahms, and the modernist world of Schoenberg and Webern. He combined rigorous technique with deep emotional resonance, leaving a body of work that continues to challenge and move audiences. Joseph Machlis, author of *The Enjoyment of Music*, writes, "It was the unique achievement of Alban Berg to humanize the abstract procedures of the Schoenbergian technique and to reconcile them with the expression of feeling. Upon a new and difficult idiom he imprinted the stamp of a lyric imagination of the first order."

Though his life was cut short, Berg's influence has endured. He showed that twelve-tone music could be both structurally sophisticated and profoundly expressive, ensuring his place among the most important composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Violin Concerto "To the Memory of an Angel" – Alban Berg (1935)**

**Orchestration:** 2 flutes (both = piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd = English horn), 3 clarinets (3rd = alto saxophone), bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, trombone, bass trombone, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, gong, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle), harp, strings, and solo violin.

The Violin Concerto was commissioned by the Russian-American violinist Louis Krasner. Krasner had been impressed with Berg's *Wozzeck*, *Lyric Suite* and other compositions, and finally, in 1935, convinced Berg to accept the commission. Krasner believed that Berg was the one to release twelve-tone music from the stigma of "all brain, no heart" by demonstrating its lyric and expressive potential. The composer accepted partly because he needed the money, and partly because of his

desire to memorialize 18-year-old Manon Gropius, daughter of architect Walter Gropius and Alma Mahler (Gustav's widow) who had died of polio.

Berg interrupted the orchestration of *Lulu* to compose the Concerto. Dedicated *To the Memory of an Angel*, it poured out of him with uncharacteristic speed, urgency, and ease. Manon was a radiant figure in Vienna's artistic circles and Berg's grief at her passing turned the Concerto into an elegy. Dying unexpectedly just months after finishing it, it would become his last completed work. He never heard it performed. Krasner premiered the Concerto in Barcelona in 1936, four months after the composer's death. It is now regarded as one of the greatest violin concertos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a work that blends modernist technique with profound human feeling.

The twelve-tone method, developed by Arnold Schoenberg in the 1920s, takes all twelve notes of the chromatic scale and arranges them in a specific order called a tone row. Then they are manipulated in various ways: inversion (upside-down), retrograde (backwards), and transposition. All the notes have equal value and importance, so the system gives a structural coherence without the traditional tonality of a key and diatonic scale.

Berg adopted the method. But instead of the strict intellectual rigour used by Schoenberg, Berg was more flexible and often embedded tonal references within a twelve-tone framework. His music can sound more tonal than it technically is, making it particularly accessible in comparison to the work of other serialists. Listeners still will not find the music hummable but will hear quotations from more familiar tonal music. The Violin Concerto includes a Carinthian (Austrian provincial) folk song and a Bach chorale. This gives the music a sense of emotional warmth even as it operates within strict serial technique.

For listeners with some musical education, here is the specific tone row Berg chose: G B $\flat$  D F $\sharp$  A C E G $\sharp$  B C $\sharp$  E $\flat$  F. All twelve notes of the chromatic scale are there—but notice the intervals between successive notes. They are different from simply playing twelve consecutive notes on a piano keyboard. This gives a strong tonal undercurrent: each group of three notes forms a triad, alternatively between minor and major keys, giving a bittersweet feeling.

The piece is in two movements, each split into two sections. The first movement represents a portrait of Manon Gropius's life. The second symbolizes a drama of "death and transfiguration."

**Part I: Andante—Allegretto.** The movement starts with four open strings of the violin, G-D-A-E, which are the first four odd-numbered notes of the tone row. It is as if Berg is saying, "I took my violin out of the case and these notes came to mind." These notes, each bearing a minor or major chord, provide the framework and scaffolding. The last four notes also have a special meaning, as we shall see.

The Andante, which Berg thought of as a Prelude, presents a set of variations of the twelve-tone row, alternating between minor and major chords, and minor and major thirds. Careful listening can detect backward and forwards and upside-down variations. Overall, there is a sense of innocence, a musical portrait of Manon's youth.

This moves into a light but wistful Allegretto (Scherzo), full of dances—ländler and waltzes—built from Carinthian folk rhythms and melodies that Berg may have heard in rural Austria where he composed the Concerto. Listen for a tune with familiar tonality, perhaps a children's song? This part

is almost disarming in its warmth, so unlike the harsh angularity often associated with modernism. But there is complexity beneath the surface: Berg seamlessly builds this lyrical world from his tone row, weaving tonal and atonal colours together.

**Part II: Allegro—Adagio.** The mood darkens suddenly with a depiction of Manon's death. The music turns stormy and fiery. The orchestra erupts with restless energy, and the violin line becomes jagged and urgent. This section is also called a Cadenza, with very difficult passages in the solo part. Both the violin and the orchestra are pushed to their limits, suggesting illness and struggle. They produce music full of anxiety, inexorable momentum and violence. It reaches a crazy and chaotic climax, marked in the score as "High point of the Allegro".

Then comes the heart of the Concerto: a much calmer Adagio where the violin quietly quotes the Bach chorale *Es ist genug* (*It is enough*), accompanied only by the bassoon and a few strings. Berg embeds the melody into the tone row itself, allowing the soloist to rise above the orchestra like a voice letting go of earthly pain. The chorale is harmonized by the clarinets in a way that echoes Bach's original setting of the chorale in *Cantata BWV 60*.

Musicologist Michael Steinberg comments that even after Berg had determined most of the material for the Concerto, he was still looking for a suitable Bach chorale to use. His luck was unbelievable; the first four notes [of this one] were the last four of Berg's tone row and the text was perfect, a version of "I'm ready, Lord, take my soul." Steinberg writes, "It is, moreover, Bach's most adventurous, chromatic, tension-laden chorale harmonization, so that it fits uncannily with Berg's own harmonic style."

Berg's and Bach's harmonizations alternate and subtly intersect. Variations follow the playing through of the hymn. The melody is heard in muted cellos and harp, then the solo violin, and more and more violins in orchestra. Berg asks the violinist to "audibly and visibly" take leadership of the strings. Gradually, the other strings drop away, leaving only the soloist. The Carinthian song is heard as if from a great distance, like an organ over the mountain, and the chorale brings the work to a serene conclusion. The last notes we hear are a barely audible recollection of the open strings where the Concerto began.

The effect is devastating and luminous at once—a musical farewell that reaches across time. It's no accident that Berg's last completed work ends with a chorale about the soul's peaceful release. Berg's final artistic statement was a personal lament, a requiem for a young woman, and, in retrospect, his own requiem, too. Violinist Gil Shaham comments that the work has the sound and feeling that the Europe of old was gone, and no one knew what the new Europe would look like.

Keep an open mind and open ears as you listen to this Concerto. It is often described as the most accessible twelve-tone work ever written precisely because Berg combined the intellectual rigour of serialism with human emotion. It remains one of the most performed and beloved concertos of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a work where modernism and tradition speak in one voice.

Even if the music is not to your taste, try to appreciate the work's artistry and brilliance. One may not love Shakespeare but still appreciate the genius of his work.

## **GABRIEL FAURÉ (1845 to 1924)**

Gabriel Fauré's music has a special quality: a quiet radiance that never shouts but always shines. His art bridges worlds: Romanticism and Modernism, sacred and secular, intimate salons and grand institutions. Revered by his students, admired by fellow composers, and beloved by performers, Fauré is one of the most distinctive and quietly influential figures in French music.

Fauré was born in 1845 in rural southwestern France, the youngest of six children in a modest but cultured family. His father was a school director, and it soon became clear that Gabriel had an exceptional ear: he famously learned to pick out tunes on a broken harmonium in a nearby chapel. Recognizing his gift, a family friend arranged for the nine-year-old Fauré to enroll at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, a school dedicated to training church musicians. For a boy from the provinces, this was a dramatic leap into the artistic capital of France.

At Niedermeyer, Fauré received rigorous training in organ, composition, and choral music. He excelled as a pianist and improviser, but perhaps most importantly, he was taught by Camille Saint-Saëns, who became both mentor and lifelong friend. Saint-Saëns introduced the young Fauré to a broader musical world—from Bach to Liszt, from Mozart to Wagner—encouraging him to look beyond the strictly liturgical curriculum. This balance of discipline and openness would become a defining feature of Fauré's artistic personality: rooted in tradition but always staying current.

After completing his studies, Fauré began a steady but unglamorous career as a church organist and teacher, including at l'Église de la Madeleine, one of Paris's most prestigious churches. There he often filled in for Saint-Saëns as deputy principal organist. Although Fauré played the organ professionally for four decades, he wrote no solo compositions for the instrument. Despite preferring the piano, Fauré played the organ because it gave him a regular income.

But late 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris was more than a city of churches. It was also a city of salons, where artists, writers, and musicians mingled. Fauré became a sought-after pianist and improviser in these salons, where his refined charm and quiet wit won him friends among Paris's cultural elite. During this period, he composed many of his most enduring early works: songs (*mélodies*), intimate piano works, and chamber music. His gift for subtle, flowing, and utterly French melody was already unmistakable.

Fauré's personality was often described as gentle, understated, and reserved, though not without warmth. He was charming in conversation, but preferred the company of friends and students to the spotlight of celebrity. He married Marie Fremiet in 1883 and had two sons, but the marriage was not especially happy. Fauré's emotional life was complicated, marked by intense friendships and several romantic entanglements. According to contemporary accounts, women found Fauré extremely attractive, and he was quite a "lady's man." Music was his most constant companion.

In 1896, Fauré was appointed church organist at l'Église de la Madeleine, and professor of composition at the Conservatoire de Paris. His students included some of the most important composers of the next generation, such as Maurice Ravel and Georges Enesco. Fauré was a patient and encouraging teacher, more interested in helping students find their own voices than imposing his. His subtle influence radiated through the French musical landscape well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1905, following the scandal of Ravel's repeated rejection from the Prix de Rome, Fauré was appointed director of the Conservatoire. His tenure modernized the institution, encouraging openness to new ideas and composers. For a man known for his quiet demeanour, this was a bold act of leadership.

Fauré's later years were shadowed by progressive hearing loss which distorted sound and made his work increasingly difficult. Yet he continued composing, creating some of his most personal and harmonically daring music. These works are less immediately tuneful than his early works, but they are imbued with luminous serenity and modern harmonic language. He retired from the Conservatoire in 1920 but remained a revered elder statesman of French music. In 1922 at an unprecedented national musical tribute, he was awarded the Grand-Croix of the Légion d'Honneur, one of France's highest honours. Fauré died in Paris late in 1924, at the age of 79. His funeral was a national event, attended by leading figures of French culture.

The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a rise in the popularity of Fauré's music in Britain and to a lesser extent in Germany, Spain, and Russia. Composers from other countries, among them Elgar, Tchaikovsky, Albéniz, and Richard Strauss were fond of Fauré. The young Aaron Copland was a devoted admirer.

Fauré occupies a unique position in music history. He was born during the height of Romanticism, when Berlioz and Chopin were still composing. And he lived to hear the early works of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. He even drew discreetly on the techniques of jazz. He admired Wagner but refused to imitate him slavishly, preferring to maintain a distinctively French musical voice. His style evolved over time. His early works are lyrical and immediately accessible with clear tonal language and graceful melodies. His later works, written as his hearing failed, are more austere and harmonically adventurous, full of quiet introspection. In this way, Fauré's career mirrors the evolution of French music itself, from Romantic lyricism to the threshold of modernism.

While many composers are best known for their symphonies or operas, Fauré made his deepest mark in songs and chamber music. His *mélodies* (French art songs) transformed the genre. He refined the relationship between poetry and music, setting poems to music with sensitivity and restraint. Fauré's songs are intimate confessions, small in scale but large in emotional scope. His chamber music shows an exquisite balance of structure and lyricism. Pianists express the sheer pleasure of playing his music: it lies naturally under the hands, flowing as if it were always meant to be there. Perhaps Fauré's most famous work is his Requiem in D minor, Op. 48, discussed below.

Although he was never a flamboyant celebrity like some of his contemporaries, his influence was profound. His students carried his ideals into the modern era. His music quietly shaped the harmonic language of French impressionism and beyond. Today, his works are prized for their elegance, subtlety, and emotional directness. Fauré remains a composer of intimacy and radiance, a gentle voice whose impact is anything but small.

*Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians* provides this modern assessment: "Fauré's stature as a composer is undiminished by the passage of time. He developed a musical idiom all his own; by subtle application of old modes, he evoked the aura of eternally fresh art; by using unresolved mild discords and special coloristic effects, he anticipated procedures of Impressionism."

## Requiem, Op. 48 – Gabriel Fauré (1887-1900)

*Voices: Soprano solo, baritone solo, mixed chorus*

*Instruments: 2 flutes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, strings (violins only in the Sanctus), harp, organ, optional timpani*

Gabriel Fauré's *Requiem* stands apart from nearly every other setting of the Mass for the Dead. Where Berlioz, Verdi, and Mozart conceived their Requiems as dramas of cosmic terror and redemption, Fauré's vision is one of peace, consolation, and luminous serenity. "Everything I have written before and after," he once said, "has been a mere attempt to express what I felt in this *Requiem*."

Composed between 1887 and 1890 (and revised until 1900), Fauré's *Requiem* was not dedicated to anyone in particular but may have been prompted by the death of his father (1885) and his mother (1887). Rather, Fauré said it was simply "a work for pleasure." It was first performed in 1888 at l'Église de la Madeleine in Paris where Fauré was organist.

Rather than depict the terror of Judgment Day—Faure omitted the *Dies irae* (the *Day of Wrath*)—offering instead what he called a "lullaby of death." His Requiem soothes rather than frightens, suggesting a passage from earthly life to eternal rest, suffused with quiet faith rather than operatic grandeur. In a 1902 interview, Fauré said his goal was "to stray from the established path after all those years accompanying funerals! I'd had them up to here. I wanted to do something different."

Fauré's revisions to the work resulted in a number of different performing versions now in use, from the smallest changes to its final form with full orchestra. The sound is warm, dark, and enveloping; the violins' near absence lends the music a veiled, inward character, as if it were sung by candlelight rather than in sunlight. The famous "Pie Jesu", soaring and pure, has become one of the most beloved sacred solos in the repertoire.

The work is structured in seven movements. Most of the text is in Latin, except for the *Kyrie*, which is Koine Greek.

**I. Introit et Kyrie.** The *Introit* opens softly with divided violas and cellos creating a subdued texture. The choir enters gently. The melody is simple and modal, more chant-like than operatic. The *Kyrie* follows seamlessly, with the same melody that the tenor sang before, but now in four-part harmony, emphasizing prayerful serenity. Fauré avoids drama or dissonance; instead, he writes long, arching phrases that convey spiritual calm. The entire movement feels like a single breath, a gentle invocation rather than a plea.

**II. Offertoire.** This movement begins with a hushed, dark choral texture. The choir's contrapuntal lines overlap like murmured prayers. The harmonic language is rich, subtly moving between minor and major keys. After the baritone's solo, the choir returns and the movement ends with quiet assurance.

**III. Sanctus.** Instead of portraying the *Sanctus* with great vocal and instrumental forces, Fauré expresses it in extremely simple form. The texture is transparent, almost ethereal. This is the only movement in which Fauré fully uses the violins. The movement opens in radiant calm, with the harp playing arpeggios beneath the choir and soaring soprano. The achingly beautiful rising melody in

the violins, sometimes just a solo violin, appears several times. The orchestra then changes tone, replacing the dreamy accompaniment with a horn fanfare and male voices. The sopranos answer and the music softens, returning to harp arpeggios as the violin melody floats upwards to the final note. The orchestral writing suggests the holiness of heaven without thunder or spectacle. The overall effect is one of weightless devotion. (Personal note: This is my favourite part of the work!)

**IV. Pie Jesu.** This movement is the emotional heart of the *Requiem*. Fauré's setting is astonishingly simple: a soprano sings a single vocal line floating above soft strings and organ. The melody unfolds with pure, unadorned beauty, like a prayer sung half to God, half to oneself—tender, consoling, and timeless.

**V. Agnus Dei.** A low, steady pulse signals the soul continuing its journey. The choral writing alternates between single voices and counterpoint. Near the end, Fauré recalls the *Introit* theme, now transformed, to connect this prayer for peace to the opening's plea for eternal rest. The reprise gives the work a sense of cyclical wholeness. The music fades into a calm reconciliation between life and eternity.

**VI. Libera me.** This movement predates the *Requiem* and may have been written as an independent work. It begins dramatically, with a declamation by the baritone soloist. This is one of the few moments of overt intensity, recalling the grandeur of Verdi's oratorios. Yet even here, Fauré softens the edges. The choir's response never erupts; rather, it trembles gently, a human fear expressed in humility. The movement concludes with a return to calm as the soloist repeats in a whisper that the fear of death is transformed into trust.

**VII. In Paradisum.** The final movement is pure light. The choir intones "May angels lead you into paradise." The music shimmers with fast, broken triads in the orchestra. The orchestration is delicate: flutes and harp under the choir floating on simple, repeating phrases. The music seems to ascend continually. Fauré closes not with the weight of mortality but with the weightlessness of peace. The soul has crossed the threshold.

At first, the *Requiem* puzzled listeners expecting drama and spectacle. Yet over time it became Fauré's most beloved work, often performed at funerals and memorials, including Fauré's own. Today it is recognized as one of the great sacred masterpieces, a unique statement of faith untroubled by fear. Instead of the thunder of judgment, Fauré gives us the serenity of acceptance, a work where death is not an end but a gentle beginning.

Fauré wrote of the work, "Everything I managed to entertain by way of religious illusion I put into my Requiem, which moreover is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest."