

Talking Classical

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Fauré, whose 160th birthday falls on 12 May, is best known for his extraordinary Requiem - its sensitivity, gentleness and sweetness has led it to be described as "a lullaby of death". He is a self-effacing composer, one whose music gets under the listener's skin in a quiet yet wholly compelling way.

Born in south-west France in 1845, he was sent to Paris aged nine to study at the Niedermeyer School for budding church musicians. He was a quiet but charming student; as he grew up, his swarthy, dark-eyed looks made him magnetic to women. Nevertheless, some of his friends described him as tongue-tied and he was prone to migraine and spells of depression that he termed "spleen".

In 1872, the young Fauré was introduced to the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, in her day Europe's most celebrated singer. By now, she was in her fifties and had retired from the stage. Her husband, the writer Louis Viardot, was some 20 years her senior; the Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, however, had met her soon after her marriage and remained devoted to her for the rest of his life. The nature of their relationship remains uncertain.

Turgenev lived on the top floor of the Viardots' Paris house; and he built himself a chalet in the grounds of their country retreat at Bougival. The four Viardot children called him "Uncle".

The young composer was star-struck: for him, Pauline Viardot represented a direct link to Chopin, Liszt and Berlioz, while Turgenev was at the height of his fame. He fell obsessively in love with Pauline's third daughter, Marianne, who was timid, prone to illness and faints, but blessed with a beautiful singing voice that she preferred to keep hidden. Turgenev probably helped persuade Marianne to accept Fauré's proposal of marriage in summer 1877, soon after Fauré was appointed choirmaster at Paris's fashionable Madeleine church. Fauré also wrote an exquisite, ardent violin sonata (Op.13), dedicated to Marianne's violinist brother, Paul.

But after a few months, Marianne broke off the engagement. What went wrong? Her rejection has long been blamed for a darkening of mood in Fauré's music, though a closer look suggests that the split was not a cause, but a symptom. Pauline had previously chided him for his gloom, writing: "Make sure that that was the first and last time we shall ever see a surly, sombre, unhappy face, and all for no reason."

Two years later, Turgenev began *The Song of Triumphant Love*, a supernatural tale set in Renaissance Ferrara. Two friends, the artist Fabio and the musician Muzzio, court Valeria. She marries Fabio and is happy, but childless. Muzzio, who has acquired occult powers and a magical violin, induces in Valeria - with a hypnotic melody - an erotic dream, which he turns out to have shared. Fabio discovers the pair sleepwalking towards one another and stabs Muzzio. Several months later, Valeria finds herself playing Muzzio's *Song of Triumphant Love* and realises she is pregnant.

Turgenev states, in his *Literary Reminiscences*: "I never attempted to create a character... unless I had as my starting point not an idea but a living person to whom the appropriate elements were later on gradually attached and added."

The *ménage à trois* bears some relation to Turgenev's relationship with Pauline and Louis. But his description of Valeria fits Marianne like a glove. And Muzzio? "Muzzio... had a swarthy face and black hair, and his dark-brown eyes did not contain the happy gleam, his lips did not have the welcoming smile that were Fabio's..." The author's imagination soon parts company with his models. But did the perceptive Turgenev really associate Fauré and his magically seductive violin music with such darkness of soul? If so, he could have been right.

Fauré's *Requiem* was first performed in 1888, and, by the time he died in 1924, aged 79, he was one of French music's most significant figures. In the 1890s, Fauré's friend Chausson based his masterpiece, the *Poème* for violin and orchestra, on *The Song of Triumphant Love*. Whether he or Fauré had any idea of the potential origin of Turgenev's story is something that we will never know.