Gabriel Fauré  
Born May 12, 1845, Pamiers, Ariège, France. 
Died November 4, 1924, Passy (a suburb of Paris), France.

Suite from *Masques et bergamasques*, Op. 112

Fauré composed incidental music for *Masques et bergamasques* in 1919, incorporating works, including two songs and two choruses that he had written earlier. The first performance was given on April 10, 1919, in Monte Carlo, Monaco. The suite performed this week consists of four instrumental movements and calls for an orchestra consisting of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately fourteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s only previous subscription concert performances of Fauré’s Suite from *Masques et bergamasques* were given at Orchestra Hall on May 6, 7, and 8, 1993, with James Paul conducting.

Fauré took his title, *Masques et Bergamasques*, from a poem by Paul Verlaine, “Clair de lune,” which was first published in his *Fêtes galantes* in 1869:

> Your soul is like a landscape fantasy,  
> Where masks and Bergamasks, in charming wise,  
> Strum lutes and dance, just a bit sad to be  
> Hidden beneath their fanciful disguise.

This was the first of several poems by Verlaine that Fauré had set to music early in his career, and the song, composed in 1887, became one of his most popular and enduring works. After the Second World War, when Prince Albert I of Monaco asked him to write a short entertainment for the Monte Carlo Theater, he again thought of that song and its insinuating phrase, “masks and Bergamasks,” with its delight in playing with those two words—recalling the masks of classic commedia dell’arte figures and the old rustic Italian dance named after the town of Bergamo. (Debussy, who had also set Verlaine’s poem, had once toyed with this same title for a ballet; he also composed a *Suite bergamasque* for piano solo in 1890—its third movement is the popular *Clair de lune*.)

Fauré didn’t write for the stage early in his career, largely because he had trouble finding subject matter that fascinated him. But by 1918, when Saint-Saëns, Fauré’s mentor and soul mate, suggested his name to Prince Albert, he had composed incidental music for several theatrical productions, including Dumas’s *Caligula*, Haracourt’s *Shylock* (after Shakespeare), Molière’s *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (two decades before Richard Strauss), and, most famously, Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande* (the same play Debussy turned into an opera).

By 1919, when he began the score for *Masques et bergamasques*, Fauré was near the end of a long career that had witnessed extraordinary changes in the musical climate (born when Berlioz was working on *The Damnation of Faust*, he had lived long enough to experience, first-hand, the recent revolutions of Schoenberg and Stravinsky). As it turned out, the incidental music for *Masques et bergamasques* is Fauré’s last orchestral composition, although in fact it incorporated a number of earlier works of his, including two choruses and two songs—one, not surprisingly, is his setting of Verlaine’s “Clair de lune.” The evening’s entertainment was a collaboration with theater director Raoul Gunsbourg and René Fauchois, who had written the libretto for *Pénélope*, a sui generis dramatic work that is as close as Fauré
came to writing an opera. Taking their cue from the canvases by the French rococo painter Antoine Watteau, who was known especially for his fêtes galantes—those delicately colored pictures of the aristocracy playacting scenes from the Italian commedia dell’arte—Fauré and Fauchois offered a twist on the standard scenario. Here is the description printed in the program at the premiere: “The characters Harlequin, Gilles, and Colombine, whose task is usually to amuse the aristocratic audience, take their turn at being spectators at a ‘fête galante’ on the island of Cythera. The lords and ladies who as a rule applaud their efforts now unwittingly provide them with entertainment to their coquettish behavior.”

For his score, Fauré not only resurrected songs and choruses, but also revised three movements of a symphony he had abandoned in his mid-twenties as the exuberant new overture, elegant menuet, and buoyant gavotte included in this instrumental suite, which has given the Monte Carlo entertainment a continuing life in the concert hall. The only newly composed music in Masques et bergamasques is the pastorale, the finale of the suite. Fauré’s model is the classical era viewed through a modern lens—Reynaldo Hahn, Proust’s friend and a composer of a certain charm, said the music sounded like “Mozart imitating Fauré.” The style, like much of Fauré’s music, seems light and effortless, yet it suggests, in the subtlest way possible, a deeper understanding of the world. In 1922, Nadia Boulanger—along with Maurice Ravel, one of Fauré’s most celebrated students—wrote this touching tribute to her teacher and the mystery of his unique sensibility:

Inner gifts, exceptional ones, determined the career of Gabriel Fauré—the balance between sensibility and reason has made its beauty. Marvelously simple, quite without concession, untroubled, it has unfolded in well-ordered fashion, affording to those who were willing to see and understand, the purest example of a fine, fecund, and serene life in art. He made no explicit avowal of a weight of grief, nor even hinted it, and this reticence is the more cherishable in an age that is too eager to spread its troubles before the world and divulge its states of soul. But it is impossible to doubt for an instant that the musician who wrote the Élegie, the Andante of the First Quartet, Prison, and so many other moving pages, has not known suffering. Whether life taught it to him or his genius divined it, we need never know, but one conclusion is inescapable: all was tempered in his work by the incomparable sense of order which constitutes its greatness and its lasting quality. His power, free of affectation or roughness, charms, dominates, takes possession—his originality, without resort to strategy, revolution, or noise, innovates, renews, builds. His music is inwardly moving; without pose, vain exclamations

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