

The Transcriber's Art – #50
Gabriel Fauré, *Mai* and *Le plus doux chemin*
by Richard Yates

“To me ... music exists to elevate us as far as possible above everyday life.”
– Gabriel Fauré

For most of his career, everyday life was the only setting where people could hear Gabriel Fauré's music. The homes of friends and salons where he gave small recitals for colleagues were his only arenas until he was nearly 50 years old, when he became more widely known as a significant composer. Although he wrote in some larger musical forms, he was the master of the accompanied song. He is recognized as the greatest of the French Art Song composers. Simplicity, intimacy and sincerity were the essential features that he strove for, and so if a singer and pianist are to be replaced by one instrument, what better instrument than the guitar?

Guitar transcriptions of French Art Songs and investigations of the challenges of producing them have appeared here before—represented by two songs by Massenet (*Soundboard*, vol. XXXV, no.1). Not only must two instruments be reduced to one, but one of those is continuously sounding, uniquely rich in timbre and agile in articulation. The unavoidable consequence is that many accompanied songs just cannot be transcribed for the guitar in a musically persuasive way. On the positive side, though, there are many to sort through to find the few gems, and some of their features, such as the range of the melodies, do help. Of the two songs presented here, one has a melody that spans a twelfth; the other, only an octave. These both fit almost entirely on the first two strings, leaving the rest of the fingerboard acreage for the accompaniment. Tempos and dynamic ranges are both restrained.

These two songs were composed more than 40 years apart—*Mai* in 1862 when Fauré was 17 years old, after he was first introduced to “modern” music in a piano class with Camille Saint-Saëns, and *Le plus doux chemin* is from 1904 after Fauré's discovery by the rest of the world. In a career that spanned decades, from Romanticism to the radical innovations of the 20th Century, the evolution of his musical vocabulary between these two songs is remarkable.

Mai

Fauré's *Mai* is sweet, graceful and firmly placed in the common-practice, tonal harmonic mainstream. A melody with regular phrase structure is supported by an arpeggiated accompaniment and a consistent, unremarkable harmonic rhythm. The progression starting at measure 21 gives a foreshadowing of Fauré's famous harmonic *élan*, but is soon followed by a sunny return to the tonic.

The lyrics are from a poem by Victor Hugo, with the opening stanza:

Since full-flowering May calls us to the meadows,
Come! Do not tire of mingling with your soul
The countryside, the woods, the charming shade,
Vast moonlights on the banks of sleeping waters.

Prosody, the setting of syllables to notes, can raise a problem in transcription. Repeated notes can be common in songs but are hardly noticed since they each carry different articulation and semantic information. The static nature of the repetition can be more apparent when transcribed to guitar. It is also common in songs for different verses to have slightly different syllable counts and hence, different numbers of repeated notes. This obviously also happens when a song is translated into a different language. In these cases composers and singers adjust as needed and so it is reasonable for guitarists to do so, too. Accordingly, I have dropped a few repeated notes here and there to clarify the melodic narrative and, occasionally, to accommodate technical constraints.

The texture of the original score—one voice plus an arpeggiated piano accompaniment—is a common one that often presents two problems for guitar transcription: The range of the arpeggios is too large for the guitar, and its *tessitura* overlaps with the voice part. In this particular piece the regular harmonic rhythm and tonal harmonies allow an unobtrusive re-composition by compressing the accompaniment into a smaller package. It can be important to preserve the overall shape of the arpeggio although that is not always possible. Often it is vital to sustain the lowest note for its full, notated duration while other harmony notes can better tolerate varying durations. But even with these interior notes, attention must be paid to sustaining the third of each chord as ending them prematurely can be particularly noticeable and distracting. Applying these principles was possible throughout *Mai* by judicious fingering choices. Figure 1 shows four measures with these kinds of adjustment. (The key and clefs have been changed to make an easier comparison with the guitar score.)

The image displays a musical score for three instruments: voice, piano, and guitar. The score is organized into four measures. The voice part is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The piano part consists of two staves, with the upper staff showing arpeggiated chords and the lower staff showing chord symbols (II5, II, II). The guitar part is on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The guitar part shows a re-composed accompaniment with various fingering numbers (2, 3, 4, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4) and chord symbols (II5, II, II). The score is labeled 'voice', 'piano', and 'guitar' on the left side.

Figure 1

Le plus doux chemin

Fauré studied at the École Niedermeyer for 11 years beginning in 1854 when he was just nine years old. His instruction in composition theory was based in part on the ideas found in Gustave Lefèvre’s *Traité d’harmonie*. Graham Johnson writes in *Gabriel Fauré: the songs and their poets* (Ashgate Publishing, 2009): “Fauré was encouraged to think about harmony in a completely different way from that of his contemporaries ... The rule was that ‘every consonant or dissonant chord can be modified by alterations of the notes that comprise it.’”

Le plus doux chemin is rife with unresolved dissonant chords and a modal avoidance of the leading tone at end of phrases. The opening 10 bars as a whole show—in the transcription—the key E minor, but within the phrase the progressions defy common-practice analysis. A rough description is that a series of seventh chords resolve upwards by step. These form something like a deceptive cadence, and have that technique’s function of extending a phrase, but certainly with a qualitative difference from traditional harmony. The last upwards movement is from a D minor harmony to (finally) E minor, confirming the key but through modal movement.

The texture includes a thin and regular piano accompaniment that is eminently suitable for transcription. In fact, no notes needed to be dropped, even with all those seventh chords. *Le plus doux chemin* sits remarkably well on the guitar, a circumstance due more to perseverance in finding the piece than any cleverness in devising the transcription.

The lyrics are by Armand Silvestre. The first stanza is:

The sweetest path for me
Leads to my fairest’s door,
—And though she resists me,
I shall tomorrow pass by once more.

Beyond the superficial wistfulness of the song, there is an underlying edginess that wonderfully matches the poem. The third line—repeated in each verse—makes it clear that his “fairest” is really not happy with the attention, yet this reality does not seem to dissuade him. In modern terms, the word “stalker” comes to mind.

Other features illustrate the advances that Fauré had made over the decades. One in particular has an interesting effect on the transcription. Looking only at measure 19 in the guitar score, we see that the second verse has just ended with a standard dominant seventh chord and the opening melody returns, apparently starting the third verse. But in the original, this return of the opening phrase is in the piano part. The voice does not re-enter until measure 21, with the first line of the third verse, and immediately ventures into new melodic and harmonic territory. Another extra measure of melody in the piano part is interposed between each of the remaining verse lines. These inserted measures carry the logical, melodic continuation of the voice part. One result of these offsets is that the third verse is stretched out, making the final line sound more like a coda. The original poem, with its regular, square verse structure, is transformed into a through-composed song. In the transcription I have merged the voice and interposed piano melody lines. The result makes musical sense. It is as if Fauré broke the original poem, and the melody he composed, into pieces and then reassembled and redistributed the words and notes between the instruments. There is a Cubist quality to the structure, although it would be several years before that term and trend appeared in the visual arts. Although there is no way to know if this is how Fauré proceeded, the transcription feels like a reconstruction of the original.

Please send your comments and suggestions to:

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Le plus doux chemin

Op. 87, No. 1

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Gabriel Fauré
(1845–1924)

Moderato

8 *p*

4 ② VII V VII

7 V V₂ V₄

10 II₃

13 ① V *cresc.*

16 III ② VII IV

19 *p*

22 *mf*

25 *p*

28 *dolce* *poco rit.*

31 *a tempo*

34 *p*

Mai

Op. 1, No. 2

Transcribed for guitar
by Richard Yates

Gabriel Fauré
(1845–1924)

Allegretto

⑥ =D

dolce

①

②

④

②

②

sempre p

②

19 ^② ^③ VII ^② h—

22 —VI— V *mf*

25 III₃ II₃ ^② ^② *poco rall.* *a tempo* *cresc.*

29 VII VII— *f*

32 *rall. e dim.* *a tempo p*

35 ^④