

LOVE triumphant?

Is there a link between Chausson's *Poème* and the doomed romance of his friend Fauré? **Jessica Duchen** investigates

The first manuscript of Chausson's *Poème* bears the inscription *Le chant de Vamour triomphant*. It indicates one primary spur behind the work: Ivan Turgenev's *The Song of Triumphant Love*, a short story that has clear resonances with the Russian author's long-running emotional attachment to the mezzo-soprano and composer Pauline Viardot. But there may be another, hitherto unknown, musical link in the origin of Turgenev's story: a prequel that casts the *Poème* in a light gleaming with irony. It takes the form of a delicate three-way connection involving another composer, Gabriel Fauré.

In 1843, at the age of 25, Turgenev attended a performance by Pauline Viardot when she first sang in St Petersburg, and fell in love with her at once.

She was then 22, but was already one of the most celebrated mezzo-sopranos of her day. In 1840 she had married the writer and theatre director Louis Viardot, 21 years her senior - on her side, a match of convenience rather than love. Turgenev's passion for Pauline lasted his whole life, sometimes apparently unrequited, sometimes not. Gossip suggested that Pauline's second daughter, Claudie, and son, Paul, might have been Turgenev's; the truth has never been established. But Paul, a fine musician, shared with Turgenev a quality lacking in the uncommunicative Louis Viardot: he was a great raconteur.

Turgenev took up residence close to the Viardots, moving around Europe to be near them, first to Baden-Baden, then London, then back to France once again.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Ivan Turgenev	friend of the Viardot family
Gabriel Fauré	friend of Turgenev and Viardot family, suitor to Marianne Viardot
Ernest Chausson	friend of Fauré
Pauline Viardot	object of Turgenev's affection
Louis Viardot	husband of Pauline Viardot
Claudie Viardot	daughter of Pauline and Louis (or possibly Turgenev)
Paul Viardot	son of Pauline and Louis (or possibly Turgenev)
Marianne Viardot	daughter of Pauline and Louis, courted by Fauré
Alphonse Duvernoy	husband of Marianne Viardot

SONG OF TRIUMPHANT LOVE

Fabio	painter
Muzzio (possibly modelled on Fauré)	musician
Valeria (possibly modelled on Marianne Viardot)	married to Fabio, object of 'Muzzio's affections

From 1872, he lived in a flat on the top floor of **their** Paris home; two years later they bought a country home, Les Frènes, at Bougival, where Turgenev built a chalet for himself in the garden. Pauline's husband appears to have accepted this situation.

Turgenev's plots and characters were often subtly derived from real life. In his *Literary Reminiscences*, he declared: 'I never attempted "to create a character" unless I had as my starting point... a living person to whom the appropriate elements were later on gradually attached and added. Not possessing a great amount of free inventive power, I always felt the need of some firm ground on which I could plant my feet.'

The *Song of Triumphant Love*, written in 1881, two years before the author's death, has always baffled critics. His biographer V.S. Pritchett writes: 'The story... was enormously popular with the sentimental public, but the critics thought that it was trash.' Another biographer, David Magarshak, declares: 'It is his only purely imaginative story... an erotic story of magic and the magical influence of music. It seems to express the all-absorbing influence Pauline Viardot's art had on Turgenev and his recognition of his inability ever to possess her except by some means that lay outside ordinary human experience.'

The story is set in Renaissance Ferrara. Two close friends - a painter, Fabio, and a musician, Muzzio - **fall** in love with the same girl, Valeria. On her mother's advice, she marries Fabio. Muzzio travels to the Far East to recover. When he returns five years later, Fabio and Valeria are happily settled, but childless; Fabio is painting a portrait of Valeria as St Cecilia. They offer Muzzio accommodation in a pavilion in their garden. But during his travels, Muzzio has acquired sinister



powers. Producing a mysterious Eastern violin patterned with snakeskin, he plays a melody named 'The Song of Triumphant Love'. It mesmerises Valeria, inducing a vivid erotic dream which, the next day, Muzzio appears to have dreamt as well. Next, the call of the magic violin forces her to sleepwalk into the garden to meet him; he is also in a state of hypnotic somnambulism. Fabio follows them and stabs Muzzio; Muzzio, in a peculiar state between death and life, is taken away by his servant. Fabio and Valeria return to normal life - until Valeria, at the organ, finds herself playing Muzzio's *Song of Triumphant Love* and feels the stirring of new life in her womb. 'Could it be...?' Turgenev asks.

It is surely evident that certain non-supernatural elements of this love triangle are not purely imaginative: it contains obvious hints of Turgenev's relationship with the Viardots. But a further, previously unsuspected 'starting point' lies in the characters: Valeria and Muzzio bear striking resemblances to Pauline's third daughter, Marianne, and her one-time suitor, Faure. The latter, •

ABOVE Gabriel Faure, who was briefly engaged to Marianne Viardot. Did Chausson consciously base his masterpiece on this episode in his friend's life?

BELOW one of the Chaussons' salons, at which Faure was a regular guest. Madame Chausson is playing piano duets with Debussy



obsessively in love with Marianne, courted her for four years and in the summer of 1877 she finally accepted his proposal of marriage - but she broke off the engagement that October, leaving him heartbroken. It seems that the intensity of his feelings frightened her away.

Fauré's teacher, Saint-Saëns, had introduced the young composer to the Viardot family in 1872; he was quickly accepted into their close-knit artistic circle. He was 27 and Marianne about 19. Fauré recalled: 'Turgenev was the big gun, good-looking and with a gentleness that was even more attractive. I remember the timbre of his voice so well that when I read one of his books it seems that I hear him.'

Turgenev appears to have been fond of Fauré in return; and Fauré's biographer Jean-Michel Nectoux suggests that Turgenev helped to persuade Marianne, who called Turgenev 'Uncle', to accept Fauré's proposal of marriage (if only temporarily). Fauré was touched by their closeness: 'I have written to our uncle and told him that I wished you loved me only a quarter as much as you do him,' he wrote to her. •

RIGHT Pauline Viardot (pictured, left, with contralto Alboni) was the greatest mezzo-soprano of her day; Turgenev fell in love with her and eventually lived in a chalet at the bottom of her garden



'Mon-ton poème'

Chausson's great work is dedicated to Ysaÿe, who provided him with more than mere inspiration. **Philippe Graffin** explains

The freedom of its form never goes against its harmonious proportion. The sense of dreamy gentleness is at its most touching at the end when, leaving aside all trace of description and anecdote, the music becomes that very feeling which inspires its emotion. Such moments in the work of an artist are very rare.'

BELOW Chausson said of his *Poème*: 'It is different from anything which has appeared before'

Debussy wrote these lines about Chausson's *Poème* in 1913, some 17 years after the work's first performance in 1896 and 14 years after its composer's tragic death in a



cycling accident. They are testimony not only to Debussy's knowledge of what lay behind the *Poème*'s score, but also to the affection in which he still held the memory of his friend.

In the summer of 1893 while Chausson was starting his *Poème*, Debussy was finishing his String Quartet, which he originally intended to dedicate to Chausson. But upon his colleague's lack of comprehension of its 'modernity', Debussy chose instead their shared muse, the violinist Eugene Ysaÿe.

In the case of the *Poème*, the involvement of its dedicatee, Ysaÿe, was more than simply in giving its first

performance. Ysaÿe's own *Poème élégiaque* op. 12 for violin and orchestra, enigmatically dedicated to Faure', was written just a year before. With its eerie scordatura effect, it has much in common with Chausson's *Poème*, and the latter's unashamedly Wagnerian lyricism, its wonderful, dark atmosphere and its sublime ending with descending trills.

Far indeed from a conventional concerto, this is a new beginning, aiming towards a freer concept of form. Chausson wrote to Vincent d'Indy in August 1895: 'I really believe that there is something to be said for this sort of piece for violin and orchestra, which is very different from anything that has appeared before.' Two years earlier, he had written to Ysaÿe: 'I hardly know where to begin with a concerto, which is a huge undertaking, the devil's own task. But I can cope with a shorter work. It will be in very free form with several passages in which the violin plays alone.'

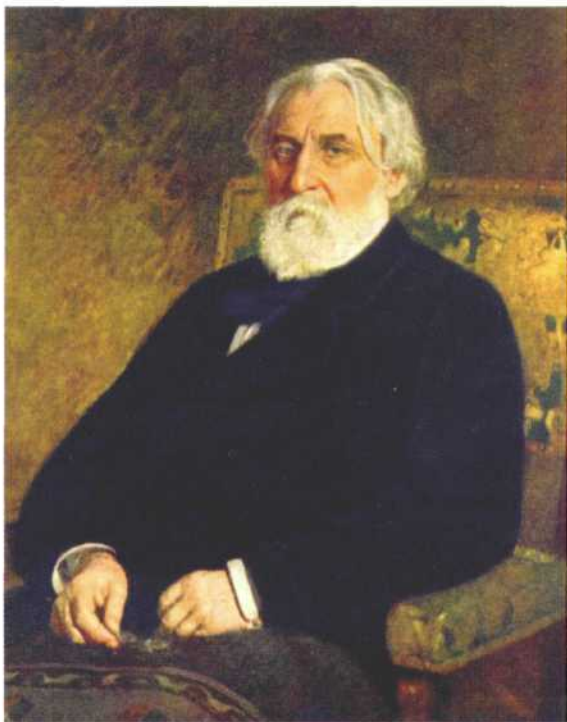
The various manuscripts that have survived depict the evolution of Chausson's *Poème* and the composer's own thought process. The progressive changes to its title at the top of the page bear witness to its transformation from *Turgenev's Le Chant de l'amour triomphant* to *Poème symphonique* to, finally, simply *Poème*.

We now know that Chausson wrote three different versions, one with orchestra, one with piano accompaniment (which has since been rewritten by others in a more playable arrangement) and finally, most recently discovered, a companion to •

In April 1881, Marianne married the composer Alphonse Duvernoy. Turgenev finished *The Song of Triumphant Love* two months later, having begun it in 1879, two years after Marianne broke her engagement to Fauré. The description of Valeria in *The Song of Triumphant Love* is virtually a description of Marianne herself:

To all who met her, Valeria suggested a feeling of involuntary surprise and... tender respect, so modest was her bearing, so little, it seemed, did she realise the full extent of her charms. Some people... found her appearance a little pale;... her eyes, which were almost always lowered, expressed a certain shyness and even timidity... But there was a rumour that she had a beautiful voice.

Marianne did sing well; Turgenev had hoped she might pursue a professional career and Fauré dedicated several duets to her and her sister Claudie. Fauré had written to Marianne on 28 August 1877, while they •



LEFT Turgenev, who wrote: 'I never attempted to create a character unless I had as my starting point a living person.' In his *Song of Triumphant Love* the protagonists bear a striking similarity to Marianne Viardot and Fauré

Example 1



Example 2



his Concert op. 21 (1892), which was also written for Ysaye just a few years earlier: a version for violin, string quartet and piano. The solo violin part, however, has been worked out from the orchestral version and does not change except for one detail: in the manuscript at figure 12, Chausson wrote: 'Octaves ad libitum when playing with orchestra and necessary when with piano.'

I believe that this difference has not only to do with the fact that we need to hear the violin at that point, but also with the Turgenev story itself, where at that moment two voices need to be heard singing Muzio's theme.

Chausson seems to have been aware of the fragility of the violin line projecting over the orchestra in some passages, as he was still exchanging various alternatives with Ysaye (interestingly, ten bars before and up to figure 21 in the *Poème symphonique* manuscript are completely different from the final, published version) when he learnt that the German publisher Breitkopf had at last agreed to print the *Poème*. In fact, it was thanks to the intervention of Isaac Albeniz, who paid Breitkopf generously out of his own pocket, that the work was published at all. Chausson certainly knew nothing about that. 'It's ridiculous, but I'm delighted to have made three hundred Marks,' he wrote.

Ysaye's final corrections, although approved by Chausson, were not published until much later, by Ysaye's son in Brussels. This is probably one of the reasons why small variants were passed on as a performing tradition through generations of violinists by Ysaye and his students. One in particular is readily recognisable as springing from Ysaye's own taste rather than reasons of balance. Three bars before figure 22 (example 1): E flat goes to B flat, reverse of the opening violin statement; a passing D flat to C flat is added (example 2), as a sort of sigh. Other arrangements by Ysaye have survived too, notably one with organ, that all bear witness to his free handling of the violin writing.

In one of his letters to Ysaye, Chausson describes the work as 'my-your *Poème*'; this was certainly a generous gesture, yet also not completely undeserved. Moreover, according to one well-known anecdote, Ysaye, giving a public masterclass in Paris at the Salle Cortot towards the end of his life, exclaimed to an incredulous student about the cadenza: 'But do you really think he could have written that by himself?'

The *Poème* is certainly still Chausson's best-known work to this day. Even though it has been part of the repertoire for more than a century, its evocative and exotic powers, like Muzio's Far Eastern violin melody described in Turgenev's story, still mesmerise us. In so doing, Chausson's music embodies also, perhaps, the ideal shared with the pinnacle of artistic creation of the same era, Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in which the narrator describes the Violin Sonata of the composer character Vinteuil: 'It had awakened in him pleasures which he could never have imagined if he had not heard it; he sensed that this alone would be able to reveal them to him, and what he had felt was something like unspoken love.' H

were taking seaside cures separately: 'How I should love to see you... to say yet again: *you are a pearl which you yourself do not realise...*' Had Marianne shown her letters from Fauré to 'Uncle'? Valeria's pallor and timidity are also Marianne's, both evident through Fauré's ardent letters during that ill-fated engagement.

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... In his conversation, Muzzio was also less lively; despite this, both friends were equally attractive to the ladies, for both were models of chivalrous courtesy.

Fauré was indeed swarthy in appearance and popular with women; and in his youth he was often considered tongue-tied. When he became engaged to Marianne, his friend Romain Bussine described him in a letter: 'He's normally so taciturn, but now he's become extrovert, gossiping, running and jumping around.'

Fauré's emotional volatility worked against him, however. Pauline, distressed by an apparent change in his personality towards impatience and incipient misery, wrote to him thus on 24 August after removing her daughter to the seaside:

Marianne is beginning to acquire a healthy colour and has stopped having those pale fainting fits... Turgenev has taken Marianne out in a boat several times, much to her delight...

As for you, my dear child... come back to us in good health, in good cheer, happy. Make sure that that was the first and last time we shall ever see a surly, sombre, unhappy face... but as you said, that was a mad gust that blew once.

Turgenev, too, described Fauré arriving at Bougival with a migraine (in September 1877) and added: 'It must be hoped that his access to "blue devils" [hypochondria and dark thoughts] has disappeared forever.' It had not. These letters help to show that Fauré's tendency to gloom, anger and introversion was not the result of losing Marianne, as has often been thought, but was already an essential part of him - giving the Viardots the impression of a dangerous, somewhat split personality.

After Marianne broke off the engagement, Pauline described the situation thus:

Marianne had begun to fall out of love with her fiancé and to become afraid of him... their affection would never have been in balance... he would have consumed her with his passion and she could have responded only with a gentle and really rather weak affection.

Here are Muzzio and Valeria reunited:

... on saying goodbye he pressed her hand... pushing his fingers into her palm and looking her so insistently in the face that she, though she did not raise her eyes nonetheless felt the look on her suddenly



burning cheeks... She remembered how in former years she had been frightened of him.

ABOVE Chausson (standing, centre) outside his home, in 1892, with friends including Ysaye, d'Indy and Fauré (centre three seated, respectively)

Pauline herself once said that she had worked on the story with Turgenev, and her collection of unusual musical instruments contained an ethnic violin with a snake carved into its neck which is said to have been the model for Muzzio's magical fiddle. But a more conventional violin was heard frequently in the household: that of the youthful Paul, who was the dedicatee of Fauré's Violin Sonata no. 1 op. 13, written in 1875-6. Saint-Saëns wrote an article eulogising the sonata; Turgenev offered to translate this for newspapers in Berlin and Russia. Fauré wrote his Romance op. 28 for violin and piano in the summer of 1877; he and Paul played it for the first time to the assembled Viardots. So it would not be surprising if Turgenev had associated the violin quite strongly with Fauré.

As for association, Fauré writes to Marianne on 10 September 1877: 'I shall ask Uncle to come up to my house... so that he can see two or three engravings and tell me if they would not be unworthy of being hung in our humblest corridors. One is a reproduction of Raphael's St Cecilia... a very fine print.'

Did the memory of a Renaissance St Cecilia on Fauré's wall stay with Turgenev? The painting reveals, by the saint's feet, a Renaissance viol with a fantastical creature carved into its head.

Such was the prequel to *The Song of Triumphant Love*.

Ernest Chausson was Fauré's junior by ten years. During the 1880s, the two composers became friends, colleagues and neighbours, while Fauré's music was a crucial influence on Chausson. They were close enough for Fauré to dedicate his Barcarolle no. 4 to Chausson's wife, Jeanne, and to be a witness when the birth of Chausson's son Jean-Michel-Sébastien was registered in 1889. Fauré often attended the salons that the Chaussons held in their beautiful home; their mutual friends •

included Ysaÿe - the great Belgian violinist for whom Fauré created his Piano Quintet no.1 and Chausson the Concerto.21 and *Poème*.

As early as 1890, the seeds of the *Poème* were sown when Chausson read Tolstoy's short story The Kreutzer Sonata; as a violin work based on a story, the *Poème* reverses the Kreutzer Sonata process. By July 1892, Chausson has mentioned in his diary that he has tried out with the violinist Crickboom 'the phrase of "Triumphant Love"'. By spring 1896, the

breath of air... he heard an insidious, passionate whispering... Valeria began to stir weakly.' As the last climax builds, with Fabio following the sleep-walking, spellbound Muzzio and Valeria, the Valeria melody appears in the bass in regular, menacing steps. Turgenev writes: '... coming towards him... with arms outstretched and lifelessly open eyes, was Muzzio... regularly taking one step after another.'

Fabio stabs Muzzio in an unmistakable sforzando - 'Muzzio let out a piercing scream... But at the very

THE VIOLIN'S TRILLS MATCH THE STIRRINGS OF VALERIA'S UNBORN CHILD. WHO IS THE CHILD'S FATHER? FABIO OR MUZZIO? VIARDOT OR TURGENEV?

idea for a piece based on The Song of Triumphant Love had fused with another, that of a one-movement concerto for Ysaÿe.

Chausson's biographer Jean Gallois asserts that little of the story remains in the *Poème* except the oppressive, erotic atmosphere, though he suggests that the violin's opening solo theme could be associated with Valeria and the second theme, syncopated and energetic, in 6/8, with Muzzio. But there is far more. The violin's initial cadenza sparks the action, like Muzzio's playing. Whispering from the garden seems present later in the orchestra's rapid, undulating triplets. The sinister enchantments of Muzzio lead up to a great climax - Valeria and Muzzio's shared erotic dream? - with passionate octaves on the violin over orchestral tremolando.

With the return of the rustling in the moonlit garden, and the violin's fragmented, beckoning figurations, the associations become more explicit: '... from the direction of the pavilion... there began to pour a very faint

same instant that Fabio had stabbed Muzzio, Valeria screamed just as piercingly and fell to the ground.'

The orchestra states the Valeria theme, fortissimo; the subsequent relaxing of tension suggests her gradual, thankful awakening. The young couple resume their former life as the orchestra resumes the work's opening music. The violin's final chain of fluttering trills matches the first stirrings of Valeria's unborn child. And the closing major chord has the same gentle irony as Turgenev's conclusion. Whose child is this? Fabio's or Muzzio's? Viardot's or Turgenev's?

If Fauré spotted anything over-familiar in The Song of Triumphant Love, he might well have kept it to himself, given the disturbing context. Or might he have mentioned it to Chausson? Had Chausson knowingly based his violin masterpiece on a story sparked partly by an episode in his friend's life? Or is it another of those accidental, salt-in-wound ironies that so often arise in small, intense, creative worlds? As Turgenev says, 'Could it be...?' H



LEFT Chausson at his desk, with Debussy behind him. Debussy described the end of *Poème* thus: 'the music becomes that very feeling which inspires its emotion'