Modal Sensibility in Gabriel Fauré’s Harmonic Language

by Taylor Greer

One of the greatest challenges in interpreting the music of Gabriel Fauré is accounting for the originality of his harmonic language. It is often asserted that Fauré’s unusual blend of tonality and modality can be attributed to his education at l’Ecole Niedermeyer, one of the two principal music conservatories in France during the mid-nineteenth century. To be sure, in his classes he was exposed not only to Louis Niedermeyer’s own modal accompaniment for plainchant but also to the harmonic theories of Gottfried Weber as formulated by his student, Pierre de Maleden, and later written down by Gustave Lefèvre. Few critics have considered what consequences this modal sensibility, however Fauré developed it, had for his harmonic language as a whole. For example, though Françoise Gervais develops useful categories in her exhaustive study of Fauré’s harmonic practice, including borrowings from Gregorian and non-Gregorian modes, modulatory formulas, and the like, she fails to consider how the numerous incipits that she isolates fit into a broader harmonic context.

It is my contention that a linear conception of tonal structure is crucial if we are to understand the role modality plays in Fauré’s unique harmonic style. In the following essay I will show that in three mature songs, “Les Présents,” “La Rose,” and “Une Sainte en son auréole,” Fauré uses the flat mediant as both a coloristic sonority and a structural harmony. Since his experiments with modal color (and chromaticism in general) become more pronounced in the songs written during the 1880s and 1890s, the works to be discussed are drawn from this period. Yet his modal borrowings are not limited to the harmonic sphere; they are also inextricably bound up with the development of linear motives. My reason for considering harmonic practice and motivic treatment together is that in Fauré’s modal sensibility they are linked: his greatest works are distinguished less by a revolutionary large-scale design or new species of chromatic harmony than by the way in which he uses traditional modal elements to unify an entire composition. In addition, in the last song I will show that Fauré’s treatment
Example 1: Two Progressions using Flat Mediant

Lydian modes. The object of this study is two cases of modal mixture in which a single chord—a major triad built on the flat mediant—is placed in two different harmonic contexts, as illustrated by the progressions in Example 1. The crucial question is what harmonic function does the middle chord in each group have. By examining Fauré’s music for answers to that question, we can develop a harmonic lexicon for his use of the flat mediant. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a means of prolonging the initial chord of the progression: the tonic at (a) and the dominant at (b). According to such an interpretation, this chord is a coloristic sonority which purely arises from voice leading and thus never contributes to a piece’s fundamental harmonic structure. In Example 2a the Ab chord results from the interaction of contrapuntal lines: the soprano contains a common tone; the inner voices consist of a chromatic inflection of $\bar{3}$ and a chromatic lower neighbor; and finally the third motion in the bass elaborates the tonic. Likewise, the second progression can be viewed as a variation of a traditional voice-leading pattern between outer voices: 5–8 substituting for 5–6, as shown in Example 2b and 2c. Also, the soprano prolongs 2 via an upper neighbor.4

Yet, on the other hand, in some of Fauré’s works the flat mediant serves as a structural harmony, helping to shape a composition’s middleground design. Naturally, the chord’s harmonic function differs radically, depending on whether it follows the dominant or tonic. In the former situation, it provides harmonic support for $\bar{3}$ within the soprano’s descent between 4 and 2, as indicated in Example 3a. The direct octaves of the flat mediant is intimately connected with his musical setting of the text.

When writing in major keys, Fauré, like other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers, was fond of enriching his harmonic palette by borrowing or mixing notes from the parallel Aeolian mode and more rarely from the parallel Phrygian and

Example 2: Flat Mediant as Tonic Prolongation at (a) and Dominant Prolongation at (b) and (c)
Example 3: Flat Mediant as Middleground Harmony

 implied by the outer two voices’ approach to 5 in this example are alleviated by the interpolation of a VI6 chord shown at (b). By contrast, when the flat mediant follows the tonic, its large-scale harmonic function is more elusive. Since at the end of a piece Fauré often avoids a traditional V–I cadence, other factors come into play that help reinforce closure: (1) the statement and development of melodic motives associated with the flat mediant, often in the bass; (2) the strategic placement of the I–bIII–I progression at the opening and close of a piece. Both factors will be illustrated at greater length below.

“Les Présents”

In many of Fauré’s songs the piano accompaniment consists of a short, repeating figure which eventually becomes the vehicle for introducing subtle harmonic changes. “Les Présents,” Op. 46, no. 1 (1887), his musical setting of a poem by Villiers de l’Isle Adam, provides a good example of this type of opening. The piano begins by repeating a two-measure ostinato figure four times, twice by itself and twice as accompaniment for the vocal line which enters at measure 5 (see Example 4). The ostinato consists of two chords—F and A56—which are presented in different registers and are closely intertwined with an eighth-note melody alternating between the pianist’s two hands. Despite the parallel motion among the upper three voices, Fauré avoids fifths or octaves in the pair of chords by presenting the flat mediant in first inversion. Thus the primary difference between the reduction in Example 5 and the model in Example 2a is that the bass ascends a fifth in place of the original minor third. In addition, Fauré
Example 5: “Les Présents,” Reduction of piano introduction, mm. 1-3

Example 6: “Les Présents,” middleground reading of mm. 1-12

Example 7: “Les Présents,” middleground reading of mm. 22-31

occasionally endows the bass with a strong melodic function, as in measure 2, where it unfolds a short motive, Eb–D–C, which the singer echoes at measure 11 and in retrograde at measures 7-8.6

The song’s form can be described as ternary: measures 1-12, measures 12-24, and measures 24-31. Of the three sections, the first and third are distinguished by the conspicuous absence of any structural dominant harmony, as opposed to the second that concludes with a traditional V–I cadence (measures 23-24). It is in these outer two sections where the third motion between tonic and flat mediant and the bass’s initial melodic motive play the most prominent role.

In the middleground reduction of measures 1-12 displayed in Example 6 the third span, Eb–D–C, now appears in a different guise—as part of the structural soprano. This line begins and ends on 5, which at measure 12 sounds in the piano accompaniment. The Eb⁵ is initially supported by the piano’s Ab⁶ chord but is later superseded by a V₃ of IV at measure 11. This latter harmony is striking in that it reflects the soprano’s arpeggiation up to this point: F–A–C–Eb.

In the third section the flat mediant finally makes its appearance as a structural harmony: the middleground reduction in Example 7 strongly resembles the model in Example 2a. What is unusual about the song is that it presents this modal-based sonority in two completely different settings: as a means of prolonging the tonic at the foreground and as a fundamental harmony in its own right. The use of bIII in the final section comes as no surprise, as it is implied or at least hinted at from the very beginning. Indeed, it is this harmonic kinship between the initial piano ostinato and the harmonic plan of the final section which compensates for the lack of a final V–I cadence and helps bring the song to a close.
particular interest is the principle of "motivic parallelism" at work in this song through which a chromatic diminution in the accompaniment corresponds with the song's fundamental melodic line. The third span, b♭7–5, also controls the melodic structure in the final section but here it is harmonized differently: the bass ascends by minor third and then returns to I via an E♭7 chord, as illustrated in Example 7.

"La Rose"

In another song from the same period, "La Rose", Op. 51, no. 4 (1889-90), the flat mediant also plays a central role. This harmony appears twice in the song, as a brief extension of a cadence near the beginning and in the dense, middle section in B major. We shall examine both instances with special emphasis on the motivic function of the bass.

Throughout the song Fauré creates a trio among three parts, the singer, the pianist's soprano line, and the rest of the piano accompaniment, each of which has its own distinct melodic shape and rhythmic contour. The singer's falling lines in measures 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 complement the right hand's ascending arpeggios in measures 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10 in a quasi-antiphonal arrangement. (The piano's opening arpeggio is reproduced in Example 8). In addition, a sharp contrast in rhythmic contour exists between the pianist's left hand and the two upper parts: constant anaplectic rhythms in the former and more trochaic rhythms in the latter create a continuous texture of sixteenth notes.

The underlying harmonic plan of measures 1-12, although based on the descending third bass motion outlined in Example 3b, contains several new chromatic touches. At measure 7 the V7 proceeds to a D♭6 chord substituting for the tonic (see Example 9a). The flat mediant in measure 8 ushers in a passing harmony, D♭3, which then continues on to the dominant one measure later. In this context, because the flat mediant supports b♭3 in the soprano's descent, it is part of the fundamental harmonic/melodic structure of the opening section. Within measures 6-9 the bass also plays a significant motivic role, tracing out a chromatic version of the pianist's initial rising arpeggio in measure 2, as shown by the beam in Example 9a: 5–♭1–♭♭3–♭5. This arpeggiation is an elaboration of the bass's descending third motion, V→♭III, a slightly different version of which appears later in the song.

Like the bass, the soprano also contains the flat mediant, passing downward from 5 to 2. As the graph in Example 9b indicates, b♭3 is initially supported by a D♭6, which at measure 8 is supplanted by an Ab harmony. Curiously, when viewed from a middleground perspective, the opening section as a whole displays the same dialogue between singer and accompanist witnessed in the opening measures. The three-staff format of Example 9a emphasizes the antiphonal character of the structural melody: c2–♭b1 in the voice and ab♭1–e♭1 in the accompaniment.

The piano's tranquillamente at measure 29 signals a moment of great contrast in "La Rose" for nowhere else in the song do abrupt changes in texture, register, rhythm,
Example 9a: “La Rose,” middleground reading of mm. 1-11

Example 9b:

and dynamics all coincide. Yet this extreme surface contrast conceals the underlying harmonic continuity which connects V7 in measure 28 with the dominant in measure 44. Indeed, the progression, V→♭III→V, and the circuitous bass arpeggiation both appear in measures 6-11, seen in Example 10. In this middleground graph the flat mediant performs a structural harmonic function, supporting ♭5 in the soprano. It is as if, by repeating the same chord pair five times (measures 28-37), Fauré magnifies a single moment from the first section and then continues with a more chromatic version of the opening harmonic progression.

measures 28-44 also witness two simultaneous statements of an arpeggiated augmented triad that grows out of the opening passage. They are isolated in Example 10 by brackets. The augmented fifth span in the bass depends on the chromatic arpeggiation mentioned above, beginning with F5 in measure 36 and continuing through Ab and C. The derivation of this span from the bass’s third span, C–Ab–C, is depicted in Example 11. The descending minor sixth span in the soprano is no less prominent, connecting C2 at measure 28 with E1 in measure 40. These two arpeggiated augmented triads reveal one of Fauré’s mature methods of motivic development: the simultaneous presentation of two or more linear motives in different voices. In the following song, this technique helps portray in musical terms a central image in the poem’s final lines.
Example 10: “La Rose,” reduction of mm. 27-44: two arpeggiated augmented triads marked by brackets

Example 11: Derivation of “La Rose,” mm. 27-43 from descending bass motion by

“Une Sainte en son auréole”

_La Bonne Chanson_, Op. 61 (1892-94), Fauré’s settings of nine poems from Paul Verlaine’s cycle, reveals a daring but refined harmonic language. “Une Sainte en son auréole” (hereafter abbreviated as “Une Sainte”), the first song in the cycle, is a virtual showcase for Fauré’s unique fusion of modality and tonality. The prolongational techniques involving the flat mediant observed in “Les Présents” and “La Rose” both appear at crucial junctures in this song. In addition, linear motives involving b^5 permeate the entire work, serving not only as the song’s structural climax but also as a musical commentary on the poem itself.

Fauré’s treatment of modal mixture also highlights another crucial aspect of _La Bonne Chanson_: his sensitivity to the poetry. Although some critics argue that his musical settings of Verlaine fail to do justice to the poet’s aesthetic of ambiguity and pure nuance,9 others praise Fauré’s gift for capturing the distinct “mood” of each poem in the cycle with an “instinctive musical perception.”10 Yet this “instinct” for portraying poetry in musical terms is difficult to define. On the one hand, Fauré himself admitted
in a 1902 interview that his aim was to “extricate the general feeling of a poem, rather than to concentrate on its details.” On the other hand, a substantial number of Fauré’s ninety-seven mélodies show a profound awareness of poetic details. While a thorough-going exegesis of his text setting practice would constitute a book-length study, in the remainder of this essay I will focus on three aspects of his setting of “Une Sainte”: (1) the role that the flat mediant plays in the song’s fundamental harmonic/melodic structure; (2) the presentation and development of linear motives which involve $b^3$; and (3) the expansion of the song’s prevailing phrase length which, at two different points, coincides with one of these linear motives.

Let us begin with a synopsis of the poem, the text for which is reproduced in Figure 1. The narrator has completely surrendered to reverie, contemplating what thoughts his lover’s name awakens in his mind: a saint, a horn call, or the pearlish hue of a young girl’s blushing face. As a single exhalation of sixteen lines, the poem is a continuous litany of visual and auditory images, two per stanza. The final two lines of this litany serve as the climax of the poem and the axis around which everything else turns. There is ample evidence in the text to support such an interpretation. First, Verlaine accentuates these lines with his choice of punctuation: the first period in the poem occurs at the end of line 16. Second, the only active verbs, “I see” and “I hear,” appear in the same line where the narrator finally emerges from his heretofore endless series of free associations. Until this point the reader is at a loss as to what holds this paradise of sounds and images together. Indeed, they are united in that the narrator’s imagination is stirred to eloquence by a single thought, his lover’s name, which even in the final line he never divulges. The closest he comes is his description of its regal, i.e., “Carlovingian,” character.

*Figure 1:* “Une Sainte en son auréole, *La Bonne Chanson*, Paul Verlaine

Une Sainte en son auréole
Une Châtelaine en sa tour,
Tout ce que contient la parole
Humaine de grâce et d’amour;

La note d’or que fait entendre
Le cor dans le lointain des bois,
Mariée à la fierté tendre
Des nobles Dames d’autrefois;

Avec cela le charme insigne
D’un frais sourire triomphant
Eclos dans des candeurs de cygne
Et des rougers de femme-enfant;

Des aspects nacrés blancs et roses,
Un doux accord patricien.
Je vois, j’entends toute ces choses
Dans son now Carlovingien.
The song can be divided into four sections corresponding to the poem’s four stanzas: measures 1-14, measures 14-39, measures 39-59, and measures 59-91. As in the previous two songs, the piano begins alone, unfolding a tranquil pentatonic melody. Fauré frequently entrusts the piano with a lyrical melody of its own which rivals and at times dominates the vocal line. Example 12a presents a detailed reduction of the opening fourteen measures. While this descending arabesque prolongs 5, the third span, 3–2–1, is an important melodic motive that immediately reappears in the vocal line in measures 4-5 and later is chromatically inflected in the bass (measures 13-14). Fauré eventually disturbs the pentatonic calm: he ushers in the lowered mediant by substituting a Cb6 chord at measure 9 instead of the expected dominant on Eb. As the graph indicates, the dominant is subordinate to the flat mediant, participating in a voice exchange between Cb and Eb. Following a transposed version of the piano’s pentatonic figure, the song returns to Ab via a V3 chord.

Example 12a: “Une Sainte,” La Bonne Chanson, foreground reduction of mm. 1-14

The middleground structure of this passage from “Une Sainte” is identical to the model in Example 2a. Two linear motives in Example 12b are important: the bass’s third span, Cb–Bb–Ab and the ascending half step motive, Gb–G–Ab, in the voice (and doubled by the piano). As in the opening excerpt from “Les Présents,” 3 and b3 never appear in immediate succession but rather emerge by comparing the bass’s various stepwise lines connecting I and I6 in measures 1-6 and bIII and I in measures 7-14. Furthermore, the harmonic function of the central chord in Examples 2a and 12b is to prolong the tonic. As will be shown below, this form of tonic elaboration performs a crucial musico-dramatic role at the end of the song.
Fauré’s treatment of phrase lengths also emphasizes modal mixture, and their comparison is particularly appropriate in this song because of the repetitive nature of the piano accompaniment, which often repeats a two- or three-measure ostinato. Figure 2 summarizes the song’s phrase groupings; each bracket represents a phrase and the number of measures is indicated by an arabic numeral below. For example, in the opening thirteen measures (i.e., ending on the downbeat of measure 14) the piano’s three-measure accompaniment figure appears four times, the last time lengthened by one measure. When viewed against this pattern of regularity, such an occasional irregularity has a strong impact on the listener. This particular phrase expansion is also significant as it coincides with the bass’s inflected third span. As the song unfolds, Fauré continues to link rhythmic and pitch organization by juxtaposing the development of the third motive with the expansion of phrase length.

The shift in phrase length can also be interpreted as a musical reference to the poem’s irregular meter. Verlaine is well known for the inexhaustible variety of metric schemes in his poetry called vers impair. “Une Sainte” is no exception. Here the metric scheme consists of constant alternation between eight and nine syllables per line throughout all sixteen lines. Though Fauré makes no attempt in his setting to mirror this scheme directly, his occasional expansion of phrase lengths serves as a musical counterpart to Verlaine’s pattern of alternation.

The arrival of the Eb⁰ chord in measure 22 ushers in a new, more brooding ostinato in both voice and accompaniment. The piano’s ostinato pattern is striking on account of its low range and its polyrhythmic character. When the voice enters at measure 24, it contains trochaic rhythms against which the piano juxtaposes two lines in duple meter, both in half notes, one lagging behind the other by a quarter note. These interlocking duple patterns stop every three measures at the change of harmony. The piano’s moving line voice spans a diminished fourth, Cb–G, in which is nested the bass’s inflected third motive, Cb–Bb–Ab.

The flat mediant also plays a prominent role in the second stanza’s overall harmonic and melodic structure, as shown in Example 13. The same bass arpeggiation, ⁵–Ⅰ–Ⅲ–5, already observed in “La Rose,” occurs between measures 22 and 38, but here it forms a motivic correspondence with the piano’s pentatonic figure of the opening

Example 13: “Une Sainte,” middleground reading of mm. 14-38
measures. A slight variation occurs in this arpeggiation figure in that it descends through $\hat{3}$ and ascends through $b\hat{3}$. Likewise, the structural soprano includes the flat mediant within the soprano’s descent, as observed in “La Rose.”

As in the first stanza, Fauré highlights the tension between $\hat{3}$ and $b\hat{3}$ by expanding the prevailing phrase length. The arrival of the Cb chord in measure 34 interrupts the previous twelve measures of polyrhythmic ostinato (see Figure 2). This chord sets the stage for a dramatic bass ascent which, though it appears in the foreground as an Fb major scale fragment, unfolds at a middleground level the modally-inflected tonic arpeggiation: $1-b\hat{3}-5$.

Figure 2: “Une Sainte,” chart of musical phrase lengths by stanza of text

Fauré’s setting of the final stanza provides a fitting climax to the song for he continues to develop motives already presented in stanzas I and II. Measures 70-91 of the piano-vocal score are reproduced in Example 14. In all, aspects of four different motives are combined in the voice and accompaniment, all highlighted by beams in Example 15. To begin with, he recycles the piano’s polyrhythmic ostinato from measures 22-34 and the same $V^9_7$ chord built on B instead of Eb. In the course of its descent to the tonic the bass unfolds the inflected third span now spelled as Bb–Bb–Ab. This descent, however, is interrupted by a reference to the first three notes in the piano accompaniment, Ab–B–Eb, which are retrograded and embellished by the repetition of the material from measures 15-18.

By contrast, the piano’s right hand rises from c$^2$ to c$^2$, repeating a third span which initially appears in the piano in measures 49-59. For the first time in the song the mediant and its flattened version coincide, thus transforming an opposition between C and Cb heretofore expressed linearly into a single vertical sonority: B$^9_7$. Finally, the voice’s arpeggiated line, which outlines the tonic, is modeled after the vocal part in measures 15-19. By arranging the third spans in contrary motion in the piano and juxtaposing them simultaneously against the voice’s arpeggiation, Fauré fashions a powerful three-part climax. Since all four motives are derived from the piano’s opening pentatonic figure, the result is a motivic condensation far richer than anything in “La Rose.”
Example 14: “Une Sainte,” mm. 70-94
Example 15: “Une Sainte,” overlapping statements of four fragments of pentatonic motive, mm. 70-80

This motivic condensation also serves an important formal function. Considering the fact that no dominant chord appears in the final twenty-eight measures, the song’s conclusion lacks the traditional cadential closure that characterizes the end of stanza II. Instead Fauré relies on motivic repetition as much as harmony to convey a sense of finality.

Fauré also expands the prevailing phrase length from three to four measures one last time, but he delays it until the piano’s solo epilogue (measures 85-89). One possible explanation for this delay is the conflict between the voice’s and piano’s phrase lengths throughout the final measures. Before measure 70, the voice and piano share the same phrase grouping. Between measures 70 and 84, however, this unity is disrupted, as the voice part sings in two-measure phrases in complete defiance of the by-now familiar three-measure ostinato in the piano. By reserving the final phrase expansion for the piano alone, Fauré resolves this conflict of phrase length in favor of the voice and, in the process, gives the piano a more reflective character, as if it had been listening to the voice all along.

The close correspondence between music and text in “Une Sainte” becomes clear only in the final approach to the tonic, where the vivid textual images enumerated over the entire poem still linger in the listener’s mind—like a “halo” of memories. Fauré creates a musical counterpart to this “halo” by recapitulating fragments and inflections of the opening pentatonic motive during the final two lines of text. Thus when the singer says “I see, I hear all these things,” the audience hears them too.

This musical “halo” is also reflected in the repetition of the bass’s inflected third span, which not only helps inaugurate the song (i.e., ends stanza I) but also brings it to a conclusion. In this respect the flat mediant’s function as a prolongation of tonic serves a large-scale formal function. A middleground reduction of the entire piece is displayed in Example 16.
Example 16: “Une Sainte,” middleground reading of song

In the three songs chosen for discussion, the modal colors of Fauré’s harmonic palette are in abundance. The recurrence of the same two progressions involving the flat mediant in these works confirms that Fauré’s modal borrowings can shape a piece’s overall harmonic/melodic framework as much as a single melodic line or chord progression. In addition, in two of the three songs, the harmonic function of bIII is inseparable from the development or condensation of short, linear motives. Indeed, it is through his control of motivic development and phrase grouping in “Une Sainte” that Fauré reveals his gift for text setting. Finally, his treatment of the flat mediant reveals how fully by the 1890s he had integrated a modal sensibility into his harmonic language. Instances of modal color involving other scale degrees, namely #4 and b6, can be found in several songs written during this period. Yet in each work the harmonic function of an altered scale degree is inseparably linked to a rich motivic network.
NOTES


4. A good illustration of this type of dominant prolongation can be found in Fauré’s song “Au Cimetière,” Op. 51, no. 2, mm. 10-12.

5. The scores used in this study include the Hamelle editions of Deuxième Recueil de Vingt Mélodies, Troisième Recueil de Vingt Mélodies, and the International Edition of La Bonne Chanson.

6. It can be debated whether the third span, Eb-D-C, is the tenor voice dropping below the bass or the bass presenting its own melodic material. Indeed, throughout Fauré’s music the distinction between the bass as an independent melodic line and as a succession of chord roots becomes blurred.


12. An extreme example of this occurs in the song “Clair de lune,” Op. 46, no. 2, where the voice enters only at m. 12 as if to accompany the piano’s free-standing menuet.

13. Of the nine poems which Fauré chose from the original twenty-one in Verlaine’s cycle, two others conform to this same metric scheme: “La lune blanche luit dans les bois” (no.3) and “J’allais par des chemins perfides” (no. 4).
14. Fauré also emphasizes the inflected third span by slightly distorting the poem’s line organization; he unites the words *parole* and *humaïne* (which are the last word in line 3 and the first word in line 4, respectively) in a single phrase: a musical *enjambement* of sorts.

15. While it is certainly possible to hear some kind of Eb chord—the expected continuation of the cadential $\frac{6}{4}$—implied in m. 78 when the piano and voice fall silent, ultimately I must reject such a reading. It is a mistake to try and explain Fauré’s harmonic subtleties by supplying the very cadence he avoids.

16. Two examples are “Claire de lune,” Op. 46, no. 2 and “La lune blanche,” *La Bonne Chanson*, which are both set to poems by Verlaine.