GABRIEL FAURÉ  
*Masques et Bergamasques*, Op. 112
Born: May 12, 1845, in Pamiers, France  
Died: November 4, 1924, in Paris  
Work composed: 1919  

Although his name and work are hardly obscure, Gabriel Fauré has long stood in the shadows of the major French composers active during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The refinement of his music is largely to blame for this. Not so outwardly brilliant as Saint-Saëns nor so conspicuously original as Debussy and Ravel, Fauré made the mastery of a rich harmonic palate his chief virtue. He almost never indulged in cliché or routine invention, but his innovations generally do not proclaim themselves, being instead unpretentious and unobtrusive.

In the summer of 1918, Fauré received a request from a theater in Monte Carlo to write music for a one-act entertainment combining song, dance, spoken dialogue and pantomime. The scenario proposed took both its title and slender story line from the French poet Paul Verlaine. It concerns Harlequin, Columbine and Gilles, French versions of three traditional characters in *commedia dell’arte*, the centuries-old Italian theatrical farce. The plot has them enjoying a holiday on an imaginary and idyllic island when a group of French aristocrats come ashore. Hiding in nearby bushes, the clowns observe a comedy unwittingly enacted by four couples, who engage in various flirtations and romantic dalliances.

The work’s title, *Masques et Bergamasques*, also comes from Verlaine, whose poem “Claire de lune” (the inspiration for Debussy’s famous piano piece) begins: “Your soul is a choice landscape / Where roam charming maskers and bergamaskers, / Playing the lute and dancing and almost / Sad beneath their fanciful disguises.” The word “bergamasques” derives from the *bergamasca*, an old Italian dance, though Verlaine apparently uses it simply to evoke music and dancing.

For the theater piece, which debuted in Monte Carlo in April of 1919, Fauré provided eight short musical numbers. In a letter to his wife, written just after the premiere, Fauré described his music for the production as being of an “evocative, melancholy — even somewhat nostalgic — character,” a quality that conforms perfectly to the tone of Verlaine’s poem.

Even before completing the music for *Masques et Bergamasques*, the composer had decided that he would work some of it into a concert suite for orchestra. This consists of an overture followed by three dances. The music is modest and charming, with a hint of wistfulness behind its facade of gaiety (“and almost sad beneath their fanciful disguises”).

**WHAT TO LISTEN FOR:** The neo-classical character of *Masques et Bergamasques* is evident from the beginning of the overture, which is Mozartean in its clarity, lightness and elegance. Fauré maintains the mock-antique air in the next two movements, cast in the form of 18th-century dances. First comes a minuet, in which sophisticated harmonic shadings and irregular phrase lengths soften the music’s classical outlines. Contrapuntal echoes enliven the ensuing gavotte. Fauré works his harmonic magic in the concluding Pastorale, which ties the composition up by recalling, as if in a dream, music from the overture. © 2016 Paul Schiavo