

ABSTRACT

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THE EARLY CRITICAL
RECEPTION OF GABRIEL
FAURÉ'S ONLY OPERA

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Gabriel Fauré's single full-scale opera, *Pénélope*, has been virtually forgotten since it premiered in 1913. This thesis provides the first detailed account of *Pénélope*'s critical reception during the year of its premiere. Given that the opera was received enthusiastically by the press, many Fauré scholars have blamed the opera's demise on poor timing. Close examination of the 1913 reviews reveals, however, a deep-seeded bias on the part of the press. By the time *Pénélope* premiered, Fauré was an influential and beloved member of the French musical community. Thus, we find that the reviews are as much a tribute to his personal character as they are an assessment of his opera. By properly contextualizing the reviews, we gain a clearer understanding of *Pénélope*'s true merits and weaknesses, which may help guide a future for the work in the twenty-first century.

PÉNÉLOPE IN THE PRESS: 1913
THE EARLY CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GABRIEL FAURÉ'S
ONLY OPERA

By

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Introduction

Gabriel Fauré's single full-scale opera, *Pénélope*, has been virtually forgotten since it premiered in 1913. Only in recent decades have Fauré's art songs and chamber music gained recognition outside of France, appearing on recital programs and in concert halls around the world. However, *Pénélope* never became part of the history books and the performance canon that both represent which works have lasting value in Western classical music. Although the existing Fauré scholarship devotes brief essays and book chapters to discussions of the opera, it has yet to be treated at length in any published source.

The goal of this thesis is to provide the first detailed account of *Pénélope*'s critical reception during the year of its premiere. Aside from filling a noticeable gap in current Fauré scholarship, this study is significant for several reasons, to be outlined below:

Firstly, I argue that *Pénélope*'s historical worth has been greatly undervalued, as the opera is among his most substantial works, marking the culmination of his development as a composer for voice. Given that Fauré is commonly regarded as one of the true masters of art song, equal in stature to Schubert and Schumann, each of his vocal works deserve scholarly attention. The critics who covered *Pénélope* in 1913 offer valuable insights into Fauré's only opera; their comments, when paired with an examination of Fauré's compositional process, help us more fully appreciate his genius in the realm of vocal music.

Secondly, reexamining *Pénélope* brings to light significant ideological and cultural issues that must be addressed in any study of French music during the *Belle*

Époque. Fauré's opera emerged during one of the most turbulent and exciting times in France's history. As historian Scott Haine points out, "between 1870 and 1914 the City of Light witnessed the flowering, successively, of a plethora of artistic and literary movements...indeed, the notion of an artistic avant-garde was born in Paris during this era."¹ It was also an era of competing ideologies: artists, writers, and musicians debated traditionalism versus modernism, realism versus symbolism, and Wagnerism versus nationalism. Paris was inundated with larger-than-life personalities, particularly at the theater stages that were the backbone of the city's entertainment industry.

This period also witnessed the emergence of the modern audience. In the early twentieth century, the French economy was growing at an impressive pace: a growth rate of two percent between 1873 and 1896 increased to five percent between 1905 and 1914. As a result of this growth, France was propelled into an era in which increased consumerism and mass-culture redefined the arts.²

Finally, the study of *Pénélope*'s critical reception will help us better understand why the opera never became part of the western classical music repertory. Among Fauré scholars, there is a general consensus that the opera was simply plagued by bad timing: Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* premiered just three weeks after *Pénélope*, and the scandal it caused preoccupied the Parisian press for several weeks following its first performance; the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées went bankrupt five short months after it held *Pénélope*'s Paris premiere. With World War I breaking out the following year, revivals were made virtually impossible until 1919. These unfortunate circumstances

¹Scott W. Haine, *The History of France* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 131.

²Ibid.

partly explain *Pénélope*'s lapse into obscurity. As we will see, however, the reviews from 1913 demonstrate that several other factors might have contributed to its demise.

Literature Review

When examining a work's critical reception, the discussion should extend far beyond the specific comments published in newspapers and journals of the day. It should also include the historical and cultural context that enable the reader to understand these comments, and, as is often necessary, to discern the hidden meaning behind them. Thus throughout this thesis, broader historical and biographical information will provide the foundation from which we can analyze the content of the individual reviews. This secondary source material is drawn from two main areas of study: Fauré's biography, focusing on his reputation as a composer and public figure at the time *Pénélope* premiered; and French opera theater at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly its cultural and political significance.

Of the scholars who have written about French opera in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, three stand out as the principal experts in the field: David Grayson, Steven Huebner, and Richard Langham Smith. Grayson's essay "Finding a Stage for French Opera" discusses the challenges faced by French opera composers working at the turn of the twentieth century.³ Steven Huebner situates *Pénélope* within the early twentieth-century opera world in his astute article "Ulysse Revealed."⁴ His comprehensive book from 1999, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism*,

³David Grayson, "Finding a Stage for French Opera," in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer: Paris 1830-1914*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁴Steven Huebner, "Ulysse Revealed," in *Regarding Fauré*, ed. and trans. Tom Gordon (Quebec, Canada: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999).

Nationalism, and Style, offers a broad understanding of the opera world Fauré experienced in his youth and early adulthood.⁵ Smith’s article “French Operatic Spectacle in the Twentieth Century” explores the expectations of twentieth-century opera audiences, focusing on the seminal operas that redefined the genre.⁶

Barbara Kelly and Jane Fulcher have each written extensively about the interaction between French music and politics. In her article “Debussy and the Making of a *musician française: Pelléas*, the Press, and World War I,” Kelly explores French nationalism and its influence on twentieth-century opera.⁷ Although she focuses her attention on Debussy’s *Pelléas*, her analysis of the musical press in the early twentieth century applies directly to the critical reception of *Pénélope*. Jane Fulcher’s seminal book, *French Cultural Politics and Music*, devotes an entire chapter to outlining the political and ideological leanings of each major French newspaper and the critics who worked for them.⁸ Her work is a valuable research tool that cautions us never to take a critic’s words at face value.

The writings of Jean-Michel Nectoux, the leading authority on Fauré’s life and music, offer the most comprehensive examination of *Pénélope* currently available in print. His definitive biography, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, devotes a full chapter to an overview of the opera’s composition, astute analyses of both the music and the libretto,

⁵Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶Richard Langham Smith, “French Operatic Spectacle in the Twentieth Century,” in *French Music Since Berlioz*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006).

⁷Barbara L. Kelly, “Debussy and the Making of a *musician français: Pelléas*, the Press, and World War I,” in *French Music, Culture and National Identity, 1870-1939*, ed. Barbara L. Kelly (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

⁸Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

and a few salient details about the opera's first performances.⁹ Background information is also taken from Robert Orledge's 1979 biography¹⁰; although this work was published twelve years before Nectoux's latest edition, Orledge often highlights different primary sources and offers a detailed musical analysis that varies somewhat from his colleague's. The biography by Fauré's former student, Charles Koechlin, also offers a rather detailed discussion of the opera, but is brazenly subjective in its analysis of the work.¹¹ Since Koechlin attended both the Monte Carlo and Paris premieres of *Pénélope*, his book is more valuable as a first-hand, opinion-based account than a factual reference; it is therefore treated in this thesis as a primary, rather than secondary source.

Primary Sources

The primary sources used throughout this thesis are drawn from Fauré's personal correspondence, and the newspapers and journals that were published in 1913. The letters offer insight into both Fauré's compositional process and the details surrounding *Pénélope*'s 1913 premieres—in March at the Opéra de Monte Carlo and in May at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. A significant amount of Fauré's extant correspondence covers the years he was working on the opera, 1907-1912. From Fauré's biographies, we know that during this time period, the composer's wife Marie was his closest confidant; his frequent letters to her are particularly rich in details about *Pénélope*. Fauré's letters are available in English as part of two publications: Nectoux's *Fauré: His Life through*

⁹Jean-Michel Nectoux, "The Theatre III: *Pénélope, Masques et bergamasques*," in *Fauré: A Musical Life*, trans. Roger Nichols (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁰Robert Orledge, "The Third Period: 1906-24," in *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979).

¹¹Charles Koechlin, *Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945).

His Letters, and Barrie J. Jones's *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*. Both have been used in this thesis, since each editor's selection of letters is slightly different.¹²

The reviews of *Pénélope*'s two premieres are at the heart of the present study. A certain number of these are available in print as a part of biographical studies or scholarly essays on *Fauré*; others are still unpublished and available in French libraries and archives in hard copies, and recently as part of an online database provided by the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Whenever possible, the contents of the reviews were drawn from the original, unpublished French-language sources, and were translated by the author. However, since long-term archival research *in situ* was outside the scope of the present study, gaining access to other reviews proved impractical. In these cases, the published versions of the reviews were used, in the translations provided in the secondary sources in which they appear.

One source was especially vital in guiding the research on primary sources for this thesis. In 2011, Edward R. Phillips published the latest edition of *Gabriel Fauré: A Guide to Research*, which includes an exhaustive list of all the published reviews of *Pénélope*.¹³

In addition to cataloguing the reviews, Phillips provides an overview of the reviews' content and often includes notable quotations. This allows the researcher to see how many reviews were published, which of these reviews were negative, and what the critics found particularly noteworthy.

¹²Barrie J. Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1989); Jean-Michel Nectoux, ed, *Fauré: His Life through His Letters*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1984).

¹³Edward R. Phillips, *Gabriel Fauré: a Research and Information Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

It is important to note that in 1913, the reviewers employed by the major Parisian newspapers and journals were often musicians and composers themselves; this had been the case since music criticism became a recognized discipline in the early nineteenth century.¹⁴ There was little demarcation between those participating in musical life and those writing about it. Consequently, there often arose conflicts of interest that could potentially introduce a bias into a critique; this was undoubtedly the case with many of *Pénélope's* reviews. Thus, when relevant, I will point out these potential biases in the reviews I have chosen to feature throughout this thesis.

Outline of Chapters

The content of each chapter is guided primarily by the content of the published reviews. Since *Pénélope* is not widely known, however, it was essential to include the relevant details about the work and its composer that extend beyond the critical reception. To provide this historical context, information is drawn from Fauré's personal correspondence, and the scholarship of his most knowledgeable biographers.

Chapter one examines Fauré's reputation as a composer and public figure at the time *Pénélope* premiered. It explores the way his reputation impacted *Pénélope's* critical reception.

Built on the foundational material presented in chapter one, chapter two focuses on the composition of *Pénélope*, and on the segments of the reviews that discuss its music

¹⁴Bojan Bujic, "Criticism of Music," in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, vol. 1, ed. Denis Arnold (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 387. Composers had been writing about and defending their music in print since the days of Monteverdi, but the formal discipline of music criticism was established in Germany, with the launch of a series of music periodicals in the 18th century that were dedicated to critical writings. This practice of music criticism came to full fruition early in the 19th century: the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* was first published in 1789, the *Revue musicale* was introduced in Paris in 1827, and Schumann founded his famed *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in 1834.

and libretto. Several aspects of the opera are examined in detail over the course of this chapter: its dramatic character, the relationship between the libretto and its original source, Homer's *Odyssey*, and the opera's musical language, orchestration, and overall style. Here Fauré's letters prove especially valuable, because they offer a rare glimpse into the composer's thought processes as he tackled each of the major components of the work.

Chapter three situates *Pénélope* within the broader context of the French opera world at the turn of the twentieth century, focusing specifically on the two most influential figures of the time, Richard Wagner and Claude Debussy. Throughout the course of the chapter, I examine the impact of these two composers on *Pénélope*, both in shaping Fauré's own approach to the operatic genre, and by providing the standards from which the French critics judged all new operas.

Like chapter two, chapter four shifts the focus from the bigger historical picture to *Pénélope* itself. The opera's two premieres are discussed in detail, from the pre-performance preparations to the critics' impressions of the singers, the sets, the orchestra, and the audiences' reactions.

Finally, the conclusion briefly outlines the opera's fate after 1913. I then propose a vision for *Pénélope* in the twenty-first century, using what has been learned from the reviews to offer suggestions for the future performers and scholars who might be interested in this unjustly neglected work. The thesis also contains a detailed list of the reviews published in 1913, and an extensive bibliography of both primary and secondary sources.

Chapter 1: Fauré as Composer and Public Figure

When examining Fauré's endeavors in the realm of opera, it is essential to understand his role as both a composer and public figure in the Parisian musical community of his day. This will give us valuable insight into the way his only opera would come to be received by critics when it premiered in 1913. As we will see, Fauré was best known as a salon composer, adept in the genres of *mélodie* and instrumental chamber music. For most critics, these salon works were the primary basis of comparison when they judged *Pénélope*. Additionally, his various eminent public roles were a central aspect of his reputation and could not help but shape how the music press assessed his opera.

Fauré the Composer: his Reputation Pre-*Pénélope*

Fauré's legacy as a composer of small genres was well established by the late nineteenth century. He had a strong presence in Parisian musical salons throughout his career, and his music was heard more frequently in that context than in any other. After analyzing data she collected from two major Parisian newspapers, *Le Figaro* and *Le Ménestrel*, Cécile Tardif concluded that French audiences discovered new music more readily in salons than concert halls. For instance, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, five of the ten most popular salon composers were alive and actively writing new works.¹⁵ Salons were most significant for their promotion of new vocal, piano, and chamber music, the genres in which Fauré excelled.

¹⁵Cecile Tardif, "Fauré and the Salons" in *Regarding Fauré*, ed. and trans. Tom Gordon (Quebec: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999), 6-7. The table in which Tardif presents this information does not include an

Unlike the larger, more established concert halls and operatic stages, salons took on little risk when showcasing a new composer. As salon hosts and hostesses did not depend financially on the success of a work, they could afford to present composers who had yet to establish a reputation. It is important to note that the same audiences who frequented the salons were regulars at concert halls and the opera. For unproven composers, winning over the salon audience could lead to vital support for larger, more ambitious musical projects. To a great extent, the salons decided which composers were followed to larger stages. However, the example of Fauré proves that success in the salons did not guarantee success in other venues.

Fauré found a willing and responsive audience in salon settings, but his enthusiastic acceptance was a mixed blessing. In addition to establishing a following for his chamber music and songs, the salons solidified his reputation as one of France's most talented composers. The salons brought him into contact with several generous and high-powered patrons, including the famed Princesse de Polignac, whose salon championed the works of several important contemporary composers including Ravel, Debussy, Chabrier, and later, Stravinsky and Satie.¹⁶ It was his mentor, Saint-Saëns, who initially paved his way into salon society, but once Fauré gained access to this audience his music spoke for itself, and earned him a devoted following among the Parisian elite.

Despite the obvious benefits of salon presence, Fauré was ultimately pigeonholed by this audience. Robert Orledge even suggests that gaining such favor in the salons may have diminished his reputation in the long term. He points out that by the turn of the

exact date. Since her essay focuses on the last decade of the nineteenth century, we can assume that her data was also taken from this time period.

¹⁶Robert Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1979), 34.

century Fauré's public viewed him "as the lightweight composer of elegant trifles."¹⁷ He was not associated with the larger genres that earned his colleagues lasting fame, and even late in his career, Fauré remained best known for *Après un rêve* and his other early songs. The late nineteenth-century salon audiences who had heard the premieres of these treasured early works came to expect lighthearted music delivered in concise form. This may explain why his first attempts at symphony and concerto composition never earned the public's admiration.

The *Suite d'orchestre* or Symphony in F, Op. 20 (1869-73), the Violin Concerto, Op. 14 (1878-9), and the Symphony in d minor, Op. 40 (1884), were all tepidly received, and thus failed to secure a foothold in the repertory. It was many years before Fauré succeeded in creating large-scale, substantial works that resonated with audiences. The *Requiem*, composed between 1887 and 1890, and his incidental music for *Pelléas et Mélisande* from 1898, helped him to break out of the salon and establish his reputation as a composer of "serious" works.¹⁸

The 1900 premiere of *Prométhée*, a *tragédie lyrique* in three acts for orchestra, wind band, and voices, was a resounding success and marked a turning point in Fauré's career.¹⁹ Upon hearing the work Saint-Saëns proclaimed: "I know of no one else capable of achieving lines of such dimension or such simplicity within this severely contoured

¹⁷Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 35.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹*Prométhée* is not easily categorized. Nectoux describes it as a blend of Italian opera, Wagnerian music drama, and incidental music. The alternation of spoken and sung text made it difficult for critics of Fauré's day to easily define the work as opera. The reviews of *Pénélope* suggest that Fauré's public viewed this later work as his first opera in the truest sense of the word. Today, as our definition of the genre has widened, *Prométhée* has been redefined as "opera" in some scholarly sources.

work, myself included” adding that the score possessed “that invaluable quality of being the only music suitable for the work.”²⁰

The positive reception of the *Requiem*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and *Prométhée*, demonstrate that Fauré’s large-scale works were gaining a following as he transitioned into the twentieth century. Meanwhile, Fauré kept composing *mélodie* even as he found success on larger stages, and in this smaller genre he began to alienate some members of his audience. When *La Bonne Chanson* premiered in April of 1895, listeners were taken aback. No one knew what to make of Fauré’s latest song cycle; its thematic linkages, increased use of modality, and elusive cadences were a dramatic departure for a composer dubbed the “master of charms.”²¹ After attending the cycle’s premiere, Saint-Saëns felt that Fauré had gone “completely mad.”²² Critic Marcel Proust, however, adored the work and lamented that “all the young musicians are pretty well unanimous in not liking Fauré’s *La Bonne chanson*. Apparently it’s needlessly complicated etc., very inferior to the rest.”²³ Despite its mixed reception, *La Bonne chanson* demonstrated Fauré’s maturing approach to large-scale vocal composition that would come to full fruition over a decade later with his longer cycle, *Chanson d’ève*, and finally with *Pénélope* in 1913.

²⁰Jean-Michel Nectoux, “Gabriel Fauré et Camille Saint-Saëns: correspondance inedited,” *RdM* (Paris: Heugel, 1973), translated in Orledge, 129.

²¹Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 77. These are the words Debussy used to describe Fauré in a 1903 review published in *Gil blas*. Debussy was a critic for this publication between February and June of that year, and was often quite dismissive of Fauré’s work as lacking substance and depth; in this context the phrase “master of charms” seems to be a backhanded compliment.

²²Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 187.

²³*Correspondance de Marcel Proust*, ed. Philipp Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970), 338.

Fauré's age undoubtedly played a role in the reception of his late compositions. As contemporary scholars look back on his career, there is a general consensus that Fauré was a late bloomer, failing to produce works of outstanding caliber until late in his life. For instance, he was already 55 when *Prométhée* earned him recognition in the realm of theater. It was not until seven years later, at age 62, that Fauré embarked on a full-scale opera—a considerably delayed start in a genre that had defined high culture in Paris throughout his entire lifetime.²⁴

Unlike composers such as Verdi and Wagner, who began and sustained their careers on the operatic stage, Fauré was still unproven as an opera composer when he completed *Pénélope* at age 67. Most of the 1913 reviews begin by acknowledging this fact. Nadia Boulanger, Fauré's former pupil at the Paris Conservatoire, admits in her review that many in the Parisian musical community worried if Fauré would be up to the task of creating a full-scale opera so late in his career.²⁵ A similar sentiment is expressed in reviews by Claude Avenaz, Jules Méry, Henri Quittard, and Émile Vuillermoz, among others.²⁶ However, the overwhelming majority of critics found that Fauré successfully

²⁴In his memoirs, Gounod wrote: "For a composer there is virtually only one way of making a name for himself, and that is through the theatre." (Charles Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste*, ed. Calmann Lévy (Paris, 2008), 175.) The importance of opera in Paris is also demonstrated in the music publications of the day: *Le Ménestrel*, for instance, devoted at least twice the space to opera listings and reviews as it did for purely instrumental works.

²⁵Nadia Boulanger, "Opéra de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*," *Le Ménestrel* 79, no. 11 (15 March 1913), 82. Reviews are translated by Jenny Houghton unless otherwise noted. See bibliography, page 102, for the location of the original newspaper articles through the online archives of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

²⁶Claude Avenaz, "La vie intellectuelle et artistique—Chronique musicale: *Pénélope* de M. Gabriel Fauré," *Bulletin de la semaine politique, sociale et religieuse* 10, no. 20 (14 May 1913), 238. As I have not been able to get access to this article, I have relied on Edward R. Phillips' most recent edition of *Fauré: A Guide to Research* for a summary of Avenaz's main points (see p. 320).; Jules Méry, "Premières représentation, Opéra de Monte Carlo—*Pénélope*," *Petit journal*, 7 March 1913, in Phillips, 333; Henri Quittard, "Les théâtres—Théâtre de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*," *Le Figaro*, 6 March 1913, 6; and Émile Vuillermoz, "Les théâtres: *Pénélope*," *Bulletin SIM*, May 1913, 60, in Phillips, 338.

quelled their initial doubts. Reynaldo Hahn, a fellow salon composer and critic for *Le Journal*, even wondered why the aging composer had waited so long to compose in this genre, given that he achieved a result of such high quality.²⁷

The initial skepticism about Fauré as an opera composer reinforces the fact that critics still knew Fauré best for his early songs and chamber music when *Pénélope* premiered in 1913. This is where he had solidified his reputation as one of France's national treasures, and thus it is no surprise that many of the reviews compare *Pénélope* to Fauré's early *mélodie*. Critic Xavier Leroux went so far as to label Fauré the successor and equal of Schubert and Schumann, finding that *Pénélope* exhibited a greater intensity than Fauré's *mélodie* without sacrificing any of his signature charm.²⁸ Some critics used Fauré's inclination toward art song and chamber music as a way to explain the relative simplicity of both the opera's plot and musical style. Adolphe Jullien, for instance, found that *Pénélope*'s intimate subject was well suited for the composer given his predilection for smaller genres.²⁹ Critic Jean Chantavoine, on the other hand, felt that Fauré failed to successfully surpass his salon roots: "He has not distanced himself enough from the more intimate genres of *mélodie* and chamber music to be successful here."³⁰

A small group of critics responded to Chantavoine and his sympathizers in their own reviews. These included Léon Callas, J. Saint-Jean, and Fauré's former student and eventual biographer, Charles Koechlin. Léon Callas, writing for *Revue française de*

²⁷Reynaldo Hahn, "La musique, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *Le Journal*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 328.

²⁸Xavier Leroux, "La musique au théâtre: *Pénélope*," *Musica* 30 (July 1913), 142, in Phillips, 331.

²⁹Adolphe Jullien, "*Pénélope*," *Le journal des débats*, 10 May 1913, 1.

³⁰Jean Chantavoine, "Répétition générale au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées—*Pénélope*," *Excelsior*, 10 May 1913, in Phillips, 324.

musique, condemned the critics in Chantavoine's camp for labeling any work of restrained style "salon music." Saint-Jean and Koechlin both criticized the tendency to judge composers by the size of their works, arguing that this practice is what had kept Fauré from getting the recognition he deserved.³¹

The reviews demonstrate that Fauré's years of success in the salons were a factor for the press when judging *Pénélope*; several critics who knew his smaller works underestimated his ability to conquer the operatic stage, which led them to be pleasantly surprised—even relieved—by what they heard in *Pénélope*. Others, like Chantavoine, heard the opera's simplicity as a failure to transcend the small stage. No matter how the critics' individual biases shaped their reviews, there is no denying that Fauré's reputation in the salons preceded him. The section that follows will suggest that this was equally true of his reputation as a public figure in the years leading up to *Pénélope*'s premiere.

Fauré in the Public Eye

When examining Fauré's status as a composer at the turn of the century, we cannot ignore the link between the critical reception of *Pénélope* and his public roles within the greater Parisian musical community. Fauré's first public role came in 1871 when he became a founding member of the Société nationale de musique, alongside Camille Saint-Saëns, Jules Massenet and Charles Gounod.³² The Société nationale de musique (SNM) was formed in response to French composers' desire to have their works heard by contemporary audiences. Although the organization also supported large-scale

³¹See Charles Koechlin, "Chronique musicale—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope* de M. Gabriel Fauré," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 55, no. 673 (July 1913), 78 and J. Saint-Jean, "Revue musicale—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *La nouvelle revue*, 15 June 1913, 514.

³²Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 4.

French instrumental music, it was particularly concerned with promoting *mélodie* and chamber music, the genres that found a home in the Parisian salons. Fauré's involvement with the SNM ensured that his works would be among those featured in the most prominent salons of the day, and he never fully abandoned his allegiance to the organization.

Fauré's relationship with the SNM began what would become a life of involvement in the public sphere. By age 64 he held two of the most prominent posts in the realm of French music: head of the Conservatoire de Paris and president of the Société musicale indépendante (SMI), an organization created in 1909 in response to the SNM's growing conservatism in the new century. Fauré's membership in these two competing organizations, along with his presidency of the Conservatoire, put him in the middle of an important ideological debate. A cultural divide took root in turn-of-the-century Paris which was essentially the same battle that had arisen with each emergent generation of composers: new school versus old school. We will first examine Fauré's early days at the Conservatoire and his role in the conflict.

The directorship of the Conservatoire had been a highly visible public position since the institution opened in 1795.³³ When Fauré was appointed director in 1905, he was thrust into the public eye like never before. A post that should have firmly aligned Fauré with the conservative musical establishment, in fact saw him stirring public controversy for the first time in his career.

Before Fauré took over, the Conservatoire was primarily concerned with producing young composers and performers for the operatic stage. He criticized this

³³Among the directors who preceded Fauré in the 19th century, at least two were highly esteemed members of the Parisian musical establishment: Luigi Cherubini (director from 1822-1842) and Théodore Dubois (director from 1896-1905).

approach as “anti-intellectual, uncreative, and pedestrian.”³⁴ Fauré was devoted to the idea that a deep understanding and respect for music of the past was essential for creating modern music of the highest caliber. In an interview about his new post Fauré stated that he hoped to be “the auxiliary to an art that is at once classical and modern, which sacrifices neither current taste to established tradition, nor tradition to the vagaries of current style.”³⁵

Immediately upon his appointment, Fauré set out to reform the institution’s administrative practices and curriculum. He modernized and expanded the range of music taught at the Conservatoire, exposing students to courses that, for the first time, extended well beyond the study and cultivation of music for the theater. In an address to the Conservatoire’s faculty and student body, Under-Secretary of State for Fine Arts, Etienne Dujardin-Beaumetz, supported Fauré’s reforms, stating that “future composers prepared by the Conservatoire’s remarkable instruction will be all the more facile in writing modern music if their education is stricter, more solid, and more diversified.”³⁶ Under Fauré’s leadership, students now had access to repertoire ranging from Renaissance polyphony to works by Debussy and his contemporaries. Voice students were no longer confined to the study and performance of operatic arias; for the first time *Lieder* and *mélodie* were heard in recitals and competitions throughout the academic year.

Some traditionalists viewed Fauré’s reforms as dangerously radical. In an article for *Le Revue musicale*, musicologist Jules Combarieu expressed his belief that Fauré’s

³⁴Gail Hilson Woldu, “Fauré at the Conservatoire: Critical Assessments of the Years 1896-1920,” in *Regarding Fauré*, ed. and trans. Tom Gordon (Canada: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999), 108.

³⁵These are Gabriel Fauré’s words quoted in André Nede’s, “Le Nouveau directeur du Conservatoire,” Woldu, 111.

³⁶Etienne Dujardin-Beaumetz, *Journal officiel de la République Française*, 4 August 1905, 4799-4800, translated in Woldu, 106.

role was to uphold “the *conservative*, traditional and classical” character of the Conservatoire rather than to entertain “revolutionary” notions.³⁷ The Conservatoire’s professors were particularly displeased with the changes being made, and began referring to Fauré as “Robespierre.”³⁸ Despite these pockets of opposition, most members of the greater Parisian musical community felt that Fauré would restore the Conservatoire’s artistic purpose, producing musicians that could keep up with the cultural demands of the twentieth century.

Articles published during the year Fauré was appointed show that he had the support of several important Parisian music critics—the same critics who would review *Pénélope* eight years later. Pierre Lalo (son of composer Édouard Lalo), applauded Fauré’s initial reforms, arguing that the new director was finally giving students “a real musical education—a sense of musical understanding, intelligence, and esthetic appreciation—that will enable them to become artists.”³⁹ Alfred Bruneau (*Le Matin*) and Jean Marnold (*Le Mercure musical*) also praised Fauré, each citing his ideological independence and devotion to first-rate music as qualities that would greatly benefit the Conservatoire.⁴⁰

In his role as director, Fauré was constantly forced to make controversial, often unpopular decisions. Although he was known to avoid conflict and confrontation whenever possible, the writings of his colleagues and critics suggest that he never compromised his vision to gain friends or fortune. This is demonstrated particularly well

³⁷Jules Combarieu, “M. Gabriel Fauré et la direction du Conservatoire,” *La Revue musicale*, 13 (1 July 1905), 351-2, translated in Woldu, 104.

³⁸This moniker refers to Maximilien François Marie Isidore de Robespierre (1758-1794), one of the most influential figures of the French Revolution, who was famous for his radicalism and ruthlessness.

³⁹Woldu, “Fauré at the Conservatoire,” 106.

⁴⁰Jean Marnold, “Pour le Conservatoire,” *Le Mercure musical*, 15 July 1905, 200. Alfred Bruneau, *Le Matin*, 13 June 1905. Translated in Woldu, 103-4.

by the fact that in 1909 Fauré accepted the offer to serve as president of the newly formed Société musicale indépendante (SMI). This presidency is another salient example of the close connection between his personal values and his public actions.

Led by two of Fauré's students, Maurice Ravel and Charles Koechlin, a group of young composers created the SMI after breaking away from the Société nationale, which they felt had become a reactionary organization under the presidency of Vincent d'Indy. The founders of the SMI argued that the SNM was dogmatically defending the French musical establishment at the expense of promoting valuable new music from both France and abroad.⁴¹ The SMI sought to accept all new works "worthy of interest" without allegiance to the "cliques, dogmas, and theories" that plagued the SNM.⁴²

Fauré risked losing favor with his friends and colleagues at the SNM by becoming the leader of an opposing organization. However, he managed to remain a member of the older society and maintain a close friendship with d'Indy in spite of his new post. He hoped that the two societies could eventually unite, but found himself without the extra time and energy it would take to accomplish the feat.⁴³ Nevertheless, the SMI's first few years were a glowing success and ultimately inspired the SNM to expand their artistic vision and consider a broader range of works.

Koechlin suggested that the mission of the SMI was "linked with the aesthetic, at once liberal and traditional, of Gabriel Fauré."⁴⁴ This is a particularly astute observation,

⁴¹Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 5.

⁴²Barbara L. Kelly, "Introduction: The Roles of Music and Culture in National Identity Formation," in *French Music, Culture and National Identity, 1870-1939*, ed. Barbara L. Kelly (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 6.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Charles Koechlin, *Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945), 12.

one that is illustrated equally well by Fauré's public roles and by his musical style. His professed respect for tradition was often perceived as conservatism and a general aversion to change. Fauré, however, viewed tradition as the foundation that allowed one to test the limits of art without drifting too far afield and without ignoring the lessons imparted by composers of the past, from the early Renaissance through the Romantic period. This aesthetic is what made Fauré an ideal choice for important positions of power at a time when members of the musical community were constantly at odds about the direction of French music in the twentieth century.⁴⁵

Fauré's own words offer the most compelling account of his belief system. In 1905, he outlined his intentions for the Conservatoire in an article published in *Le Figaro*. This passage gets to the heart of Fauré's values as both a composer and a public figure:

I should like to put myself in the service of an art at once classical and modern, sacrificing neither contemporary taste to salutary traditions nor traditions to the whims of fashion. But what I advocate above all is liberalism: I would not wish to exclude any serious ideas. I'm not biased in favor of any school and there is no type of music I'm inclined to ban, provided it springs from a sincere and considered doctrine.⁴⁶

Two points are particularly important to take away from this: Fauré ardently believed that classical and modern musical elements should coexist, and he valued artistic independence above all else. In the chapter that follows, we will find that the press often projected these elements of Fauré's personal ideology onto the music of *Pénélope*. For instance, *Pénélope* was widely praised as an independent, truly original work that

⁴⁵Kelly, "Introduction," 5.

⁴⁶Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 28-9.

successfully combined traditionalism and modernity. This assessment conflates Fauré's ideology with his abilities as a composer, demonstrating that his status as an eminent public and cultural figure influenced how he was perceived and presented by the press.

We have seen that by the time *Pénélope* premiered, Fauré's reputation was well established. Through his roles in the salons, the leading musical societies of the day, and the Conservatoire, Fauré's impact was far-reaching and widely acknowledged in the press. Thus, it comes as no surprise that when reviewing *Pénélope*, critics often referred to Fauré as being at the forefront of French musical life.⁴⁷ As we turn to a detailed examination of the opera's reviews, it is important to keep in mind that Fauré's esteem in the public eye generated unavoidable biases that, at times, influenced critics' judgments of his work.

⁴⁷This sentiment is expressed directly in Raoul Brunel's review for *L'homme libre* (11 May 1913), but many other critics suggest that Fauré is a leading figure in Parisian musical life by referring to his "eminence," "renown," and "high esteem."

Chapter 2: The Music of *Pénélope* –Composed and Reviewed

In February 1907 Fauré traveled to Monte Carlo to review a new work premiering at the city's opera house.⁴⁸ During his stay he had breakfast with Lucienne Bréval, a renowned Wagnerian soprano, and Raoul Gunsbourg, director of the Opéra de Monte Carlo. In a 1922 interview for *Le Petit Parisien*, Fauré recalled that their conversation was the catalyst for *Pénélope*:

At one point it was asked why I had never worked for the theatre. 'My word,' I replied, 'It's because I could never find a libretto I liked.'

[Bréval]--'And what subject would you have liked to cover?'

[Fauré]--'A subject relating to antiquity.'

[Bréval]--'What a coincidence! I have a friend who recently wrote me a work on the story of Pénélope. I'll send it to you.'⁴⁹

The friend Bréval mentioned was the young playwright, René Fauchois. After reading his play, which had yet to be performed, Fauré felt that he had at last found a worthy subject. The composer accepted the commission enthusiastically, and Fauchois immediately set to work on the libretto. Gunsbourg agreed to premiere the work at the Opéra de Monte Carlo that was housed at the charming Salle Garnier.⁵⁰ Although this was an early victory for the opera, chapter 4 will reveal more about Gunsbourg's complex role in the Monte Carlo premiere.

⁴⁸François Crucy, "Les grands figures contemporaines: Gabriel Fauré," *Le Petit Parisien*, 28 April 1922, 1. Fauré discussed his 1907 trip to Monte Carlo in an interview with Crucy; he never specifies which work he was there to see, only that he reviewed it for the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* where he had been a music critic since 1903.

⁴⁹Crucy, *Le Petit Parisien*, 2.

⁵⁰Architect Charles Garnier designed the Salle Garnier as an exact replica of the Paris Opera House (the Palais Garnier) but on a smaller scale with only 524 seats.

A brief synopsis of the opera will offer a valuable reference point for the remainder of this thesis. Based on Homer's *Odyssey*, *Pénélope* traces the events surrounding Ulysse's return to Ithaca after a twenty-year absence. The plot focuses on Pénélope, Ulysse's wife, tracing her emotional journey as she comes to terms with her husband's return. The entire opera takes place at Ulysses' palace in Ithaca, which overlooks the Aegean Sea. Act 1 opens with a scene-setting "spinning chorus" sung by Pénélope's handmaidens; by the end of the chorus the audience learns that Pénélope, who has been patiently and faithfully awaiting the return of her husband, has been beset by suitors who have invaded the palace. They seek her hand in marriage and dominion over all that Ulysses once ruled.

Pénélope enters for the first time in scene 4 to a room full of her handmaidens and suitors, who are busy drinking and socializing. She has told the suitors that she will choose one of them to marry, once she finishes weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. However, each night she stealthily undoes her day's work. The suitors, annoyed by Pénélope's visible lack of progress, announce that from now on, she will have to work under their supervision. In deep despair, Pénélope calls out, "Ulysses, faithful husband...come...relieve my distress!" As if in answer to her prayers, there is a sound from outside the palace; it is Ulysses, who has returned disguised as a beggar. No one recognizes him except his old nursemaid Eurycleé, who identifies a familiar scar on his leg. At Ulysses' request, Eurycleé vows to keep his true identity a secret.

At the start of Act 2, Pénélope, in the company of Eurycleé and the disguised Ulysses, reminisces about the distant past, recalling the happiness she and Ulysses shared in their youth. Pénélope and "the beggar" (Ulysses) share a long duet; she confides in the

mysterious stranger, but remains suspicious of his presence in the castle. To quell her doubts, “the beggar” identifies himself as a fugitive Cretan king, and claims that Ulysses stayed at his court for twelve days. To prove he is telling the truth, the beggar offers a detailed description of Ulysses’ appearance. Once he has fully earned Pénélope’s trust, he suggests a plan to outwit the suitors: “Give yourself only to him who can bend the Bow of Ulysses.” He knows that all who attempt to string his bow will fail; only Ulysses has enough strength to complete the task. Pénélope agrees to the plan and exits the scene. Upon her departure, Ulysses leaves the palace to find the shepherds who have continued to tend the land in his absence; he reveals his true identity, and they are overjoyed to be reunited with their benevolent master. Proving that their loyalties have never faltered, the shepherds agree to help Ulysses slay the suitors who have overrun his palace.

Act 3 opens on the day Pénélope has promised to choose a suitor; that evening’s bow-stringing contest will determine whom she will marry. Ulysses, preparing to reclaim his palace, finds Hercules’ massive sword hiding behind his armor; he conceals it beneath the throne Pénélope will occupy during the contest. The suitors invite Pénélope to the palace hall to oversee their attempts to string Ulysses’ bow. Just as Ulysses promised, every suitor fails. Still disguised as a beggar, Ulysses asks if he can attempt to string the bow; the suitors grant his request but ridicule him mercilessly for thinking he stands a chance. Ulysses strings the bow with ease and sends an arrow flying through a set of rings hanging in the hall. The second time he bends the bow he aims at Eurymachus, the suitors’ ringleader. After slaying Eurymachus, Ulysses throws off his disguise and

proceeds to slaughter the remaining suitors with the help of his shepherds. The King is avenged, and Pénélope is reunited with her beloved.⁵¹

Fauré as Opera Composer: *Pénélope* in Progress

Between the original commission in 1907 and the premiere in 1913, *Pénélope* was Fauré's main preoccupation. During these years Fauré's wife, Marie, was his main confidant, and their correspondence offers a detailed account of the compositional process. The composer's letters reveal his excitement, trepidation, but, above all, his unwavering dedication to the project. In a letter dated 1 September 1907, Fauré apprised Marie of his general progress, writing:

My work is up and down; one day goes well, the next badly. However, I feel sure that this work will not take me as long as I first feared, and that it should not be more than two years, from the time when I first began to think about it (last April) before it is performed.⁵²

Fauré's projected timeline proved to be exceedingly optimistic: *Pénélope* would not premiere for another five and a half years. His duties at the Paris Conservatoire left only the summer months free to compose, which explains the opera's long gestation period. In a letter to Spanish pianist and composer Isaac Albéniz dated 23 June 1908, just over a year after he began working on the opera, Fauré expressed his frustration with the situation: "[I can't tell you] how busy I am at the moment. I am absolutely overburdened

⁵¹Gabriel Fauré, *Pénélope: poème lyrique en trois actes*, libretto by René Fauchois (Paris: Heugel, 1913). Also see Charles Koechlin, *Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1945), 57 and Nectoux's *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 316-26 for a more detailed summary of each act.

⁵²Barrie J. Jones, ed. and trans. *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1989), 127-8.

with work, because I am trying, in the middle of everything else, to compose, and my poor brain, such as it is, is in a complete whirl!”⁵³

Fauré decided early on to adopt the structural principles of the Wagnerian music drama, including leitmotifs and a number-less form with fluid progression between solo, ensemble, and choral scenes. At this point, it is valuable to briefly examine Fauré’s complex and long-lasting relationship with Wagner’s operas. As we will see in chapter 3, Wagner was a pervasive force in the Parisian opera world; any composer entering the Parisian musical world at the turn of the century had to grapple with his legacy. In the discussion below, the focus will be on Fauré’s personal experiences with Wagner’s works.

In 1878, French composer and conductor André Messager invited Fauré to join him in Cologne to hear *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*. Fauré was so taken with what he had heard that he followed this trip with three more Wagner pilgrimages: in September, 1879 he heard the complete *Ring Cycle* in Munich; he attended England’s first full performance of the cycle in 1882; and in 1884, he finally made it to Bayreuth to hear *Parsifal*.⁵⁴ In the aftermath of that experience, Fauré wrote to Mme. Baugnies, the benefactress who made the trip possible: “If one has not heard Wagner in Bayreuth, one *has heard nothing!* Also take a sedative because you will be exalted to the point of delirium!”⁵⁵

⁵³Jean-Michel Nectoux, ed, *Gabriel Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, trans. J.A. Underwood (London: Marion Boyars, 1984), 277.

⁵⁴Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 12.

⁵⁵Phillipe Fauré-Frémiet, *Gabriel Fauré* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1957), 62.

For a man consistently described as calm and reserved, these words are uncharacteristically passionate; they leave no doubt that Fauré was deeply moved and invigorated by Wagner's work. This attitude is reflected in the reviews he would later publish about Wagner performances in Paris. After hearing *Götterdämmerung* at the Opéra in 1908, Fauré wrote:

This music seems to have now reached the serene regions where it soars splendidly beyond our debates, well beyond all criticism, and even beyond the most hyperbolic praise. More moving than ever, over time it has become even more noble, more vast, more clear and sublimely classic.⁵⁶

In 1914, a year after *Pénélope* premiered, Fauré was even more effusive in his praise of *Parsifal*:

It represents the splendid sunset, the appeasement of a colossal art. The miraculous masterpiece of powerful, yet serene grandeur....Again analyzing this music is impossible, because words do not exist to describe it. *Parsifal* must be listened to and seen. We must surrender to its indescribable emotion.⁵⁷

As these words suggest, Fauré was not merely inspired by Wagner's music, he was utterly overwhelmed by it. When approaching the composition of *Pénélope*, Fauré saw the Wagnerian model as his best, and perhaps his only option. He admitted as much in a letter to his wife when he wrote that *Pénélope* "is in the Wagnerian system, but there

⁵⁶Gabriel Fauré, *Opinion musicale*, ed. P.B. Gheusi (Paris: Editions Rieder, 1930), 149.

⁵⁷Ibid., 154.

is no better.”⁵⁸ Rather than directly copying Wagner’s approach, however, Fauré used his model only as a starting point. Jean-Michel Nectoux describes how Fauré’s methods differed his model:

Where Wagner’s operas were conceived as dramas, with thematic recurrences standing as so many signposts to the action, Fauré paradoxically based his dramatic style on an essentially symphonic mode of thought. He treats his leitmotifs like the themes of an instrumental work and relies on his powers of melodic invention to supply an endless series of variants and combinations.⁵⁹

Once Fauré had decided how to structure the opera, he began piecing together the melodic fragments that would generate the majority of the musical material. He describes this process to his wife in a letter from 16 August 1907:

As for the suitors, I’ve found a theme to represent them which I’m trying out, as I’m still not entirely happy with it... By “trying out,” I mean exploring all the ways it can be combined with other things to fit particular situations... I try all the ways of modifying it and using it to produce different effects, either complete or in sections... To put it briefly, I work out the *ingredients* I shall need for the opera or, if you like, I make *studies* as a painter does for a picture.⁶⁰

⁵⁸This quote is taken from a letter dated 16 August 1907 and was reprinted in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 314. Nectoux does not offer a footnote citation for this letter and it is not located in the translated collections of letters by Nectoux (*Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*) or Jones (*A Life in Letters*).

⁵⁹Nectoux, *Gabriel Fauré: A Musical Life*, 316.

⁶⁰Philippe Fauré-Frémiet, *Lettres intimes*, La Colombe, 1951, translated in Nectoux, *Musical Life* 313-14. Nectoux interprets the *ingredients* Fauré refers to as the fragments of leitmotifs that would be used in various combinations throughout the opera.

Rarely in Fauré's letters do we hear him suffering from a lack of inspiration while composing *Pénélope*; indeed, it seems that for the most part, the creative process moved quite effortlessly. The exception proved to be moments of dramatic intensity in the libretto, such as Act 3, Scene 5, when the suitors fail to string the bow and are ultimately massacred by Ulysses and his shepherds. In a letter from 5 August 1909 he writes: "This was the tricky bit: having to find sonorities which were appropriate for the creation of a dramatic atmosphere, having to think a great deal as a result, and having to start all over again on that which had already been completed."⁶¹

Many of Fauré's songs, most notably those from *La Bonne chanson* (1895) onward, are clothed in the "dramatic atmosphere" he struggled to reproduce in *Pénélope*. In the songs, however, he needed to sustain dramatic intensity for several minutes only; *Pénélope*, with a running time of just over two hours, presented a much greater challenge. In his letter from 3 August 1912, Vincent D'Indy could only have exacerbated Fauré's misgivings about the opera's dramatic elements when he wrote: "The Man who has written *Lieder* as dramatic as yours...*this* Man must write a real drama, and a good one."⁶²

A letter to Marie Fauré, dated 6 August 1912, reveals that three years after expressing his initial frustrations, the composer continued to doubt his ability to meet the demands of the operatic genre. He wrote: "I now have to find some dramatic effects—the

⁶¹Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*, 135.

⁶²Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*, 145-6.

suitors are attempting to stretch Ulysses' bow and are not succeeding in it—and I am not very gifted in this sort of thing! It gives me a great deal of difficulty.”⁶³

Fauré's treatment of the drama is the aspect of *Pénélope* that, more than any other, inspired negative remarks from the press. German critic Arthur Neisser, one of the few foreign reviewers of the opera, criticized *Pénélope*'s general lack of dramatic tension, finding only a few moments that relieve “the gray, monotone whispering of this bloodless music.”⁶⁴ As a native German and a Verdi scholar, we might assume that Neisser simply had expectations and tastes that led him to favor more intensely and overtly dramatic works. Unfortunately, similar complaints are found in the reviews of the French-speaking press. The critic for the Belgian paper *Le Soir* was disappointed with the scene of the suitor massacre (Act 3, Scene 5), finding that its music lacked the power necessary to propel the action.⁶⁵ Adolphe Jullien, critic for *Le Journal des débats*, wrote what would qualify as a rave review, if not for this casual throw-away line: “But does it not seem a bit dull in the long run, a little languid, so that we eagerly seize any opportunity to be distracted?”⁶⁶

Articles that openly criticize Fauré for his failure to produce compelling theater represent only a small percentage of the sixty-six documented reviews of *Pénélope* from 1913. Before dismissing their credibility, however, it is important to note that most of the positive reviews avoid discussing the dramatic elements of the opera entirely—a

⁶³Ibid., 146.

⁶⁴Arthur Neisser, “Neue Opern in Monte Carlo,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 20 March 1913, 2, in Phillips, 334.

⁶⁵Paul Gilson, “*Pénélope*: Première Représentation au Théâtre de la Monnaie,” *Le Soir*, 3 December 1913, in Phillips, 328.

⁶⁶Adolphe Jullien, “*Pénélope*,” *Le Journal des débats*, 11 May 1913, 2.

conspicuous omission for a genre defined as sung drama. Even the two reviewers who discussed this aspect of the work in a relatively positive light were forced to admit that powerful and exciting dramatic moments were few and far between. Thus, the critic for *Le Petit Parisien* found that *Pénélope* had “the dignity of an art which shuns exterior effect; thus its dramatic merits are, if one may say so, interior.”⁶⁷ His colleague Louis de Fourcaud, critic for *Le Gaulois*, wrote: “The intimate nature of the drama is sustained from beginning to end.”⁶⁸

Did these reviews downplay the lackluster character of the drama out of reverence for the eminent composer? Were other critics mute on the subject in order to portray *Pénélope* favorably? While there are no concrete answers to these questions, there is no doubt that Fauré’s drama was inwardly driven. His letters suggest that this might have resulted from his general discomfort with the operatic genre. Additionally, as we will learn in the next section, Fauchois’ libretto also contributed to the perception of *Pénélope* as an internally driven, psychological drama.

Libretto

Pénélope’s libretto presented Fauré with constant challenges, especially in the early stages of composition. At age 25, René Fauchois was at the very beginning of his career as a playwright, and had yet to complete a full libretto. He approached his task with abundant enthusiasm and a thorough knowledge of *The Odyssey*, but these strengths could not entirely compensate for his lack of experience with the operatic genre.

⁶⁷F. Fauré, “A l’Opéra de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*,” *Le Petit Parisien*, 6 March 1913, 6.

⁶⁸Louis de Fourcaud, “Théâtre de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*,” *Le Gaulois*, 5 March 1913, 3,

Fauré found himself having to rework the text in several places. He cut and moved passages, improved the sound of certain lines, redistributed the text between various characters, and reshaped entire scenes.⁶⁹ The composer justified the radical nature of his revisions to Marie in a letter dated 20 September 1907:

The librettist has given me too much text. He has not reflected on the fact that music can make poetry dreadfully long-drawn-out, and that what can be read in two minutes, when sung, takes three times as long at least. Therefore I am forced to cut distiches⁷⁰ or groups of four or eight lines here and there, and to see that the general sense is not losing anything in the way of clarity.⁷¹

In addition to these technical issues, Fauré was troubled by a significant change Fauchois made to the original plot. In Homer's poem, Ulysses is unrecognizable because the goddess Athena has utterly transformed him; he takes the physical form of an elderly beggar. Fauchois excised the gods from his drama, and had Ulysses alter his appearance with a rather feeble, man-made disguise. Stephen Huebner points out: "Though concealed identity was a stock device [in opera libretti], in this instance it strained Fauré's sense of verisimilitude."⁷² This is evident in a letter from 3 September 1909:

The situation is demanded by the theatre, perhaps, but it's quite unbelievable--a wife sings to her husband and doesn't recognize

⁶⁹Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 330.

⁷⁰"Distiche"—a verse made up of two lines, particularly as found in Greek and Latin elegiac poetry.

⁷¹Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*, 128.

⁷²Steven Huebner, "Ulysse Revealed," in *Regarding Fauré*, ed. and trans. Tom Gordon (Quebec, Canada: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999), 224.

him because he's wearing a false beard! And I have to force myself to feel conviction so that it comes through in her music.⁷³

The dramatic tension in the story should reach its peak when Ulysses reveals his true identity to his wife. Fauré felt that Fauchois had compromised the intensity of this significant moment. A lengthy review written by Adolphe Boschot for *L'Echo de Paris* demonstrates that Fauré was not alone in questioning the effectiveness of Fauchois' approach. Boschot's extensive critique is worth quoting here in full, because it offers a thorough overview of how Fauchois' revisionist deviations from Homer weakened the drama of *Pénélope*:

The librettist made several changes, [and] some of these changes even completely distort the nature of the characters because they completely distort the course of action... Here is the root of the problem: Where is Athena? In a music drama one has an unexpected opportunity to find the gods, and yet M. Fauchois deletes them! But what is the great dramatic device here? Who moves the action? Who directs it and makes it possible?... It is Athena. One suppresses her. And it is not just a *deus ex machina* that we are deprived of; it is not only the aging and the rejuvenation of Ulysses that is reduced to only a false beard that is put on or removed; it is the culmination of the play that is ruined. Indeed, how will Ulysses kill all suitors if he is alone, without Athena to fight with him? The librettist replaces the Goddess with a squad of shepherds. As a result he must show us in advance that Ulysses reveals himself to them. He does, and thus removes all the interest from the last act...The dramatic interest is killed before the suitors are.⁷⁴

⁷³Gabriel Fauré, *Lettres intimes*, ed. Philippe Fauré-Frémiet (Paris, La Colombe, 1951), 180, translated in Huebner, 224.

⁷⁴Adolphe Boschot, "Pénélope," *L'Echo de Paris*, 11 May 1913. 4.

This passage reminds us that critics (and audiences) had clear expectations for a setting of Homer's *Odyssey*. In *Pénélope*, Fauchois tackled a very well-known subject in an unexpected way; by eliminating the Gods and shifting the dramatic focus to Ulysses' wife, the opera transforms an epic, a heroic tale into a psychological drama that focuses on the reality of human emotion.

Stephen Huebner offers a compelling observation about the exploration of Pénélope's psyche throughout the opera. He points out that Fauré and Fauchois "stand close to the headwaters of research into the subconscious."⁷⁵ Jean-Martin Charcot and Hippolyte Bernheim's *Psychologie nouvelle* was circulated widely in the 1890s and influenced Symbolist literature and Art nouveau. There is no evidence in Fauré's letters that this was a direct influence on his opera, but, as Huebner suggests, this new realm of exploration provided an interesting framework for *Pénélope*.

Jean Chantavoine speculated in his review for *Excelsior* that Fauchois focused his libretto on the psychological drama in order to accommodate Fauré's delicate style, implying that Fauré was incapable of writing music grand enough for a Homeric theme.⁷⁶ Whether or not the latter assumption holds water, Fauchois' supposed accommodation of Fauré's style is not supported by the facts: as we know, he based his libretto on a play he completed before ever meeting the composer. Nevertheless, Chantavoine proves insightful in seeing a good fit between Fauchois' subtle drama and Fauré's musical language.

Fauré had several opportunities to work with librettists far more esteemed than Fauchois, a true novice. The composer began searching for a perfect libretto quite early in

⁷⁵Steven Huebner, "Ulysse Revealed," 210.

⁷⁶Jean Chantavoine, "A l'Opéra de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*," *Excelsior*, 4 March 1913, 2, in Phillips, 324.

his career. In 1877 he attempted to collaborate with Louis Gallet who had worked with Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Gounod and Bizet, but they never settled on a project that worked for both of them. He was offered a one-act *opéra-comique* by Jules Moineau in 1879, but this project was quickly abandoned. Armand Silvestre wrote him a libretto for *Lizarda*, but it is believed that Fauré destroyed the manuscript since no trace of it survives.

Perhaps Fauré ultimately chose Fauchois because he was the first to supply a libretto that aligned with the composer's overarching aesthetic. In a letter to his young collaborator from 13 April 1921, Fauré articulated what he cherished most in the libretto: "With *Pénélope* you had me express *humanity*, and a humanity of the most noble and the most poignant kind. You gave me matchless situations, matchless characters."⁷⁷

For some reviewers, "humanity" was the opera's weakness; for others, it was one of its most inspired qualities. Even Boschot, obviously troubled by Fauchois' plot alterations, praised *Pénélope* for giving "magnificent expression to the mystery of man's life."⁷⁸ This sentiment is echoed by Auguste Germain, who in a review for *L'Echo de Paris*, lauded Fauchois as one of the "most gifted dramatic poets of our time." The critic goes on to describe the librettist's approach to the story as follows: "Instead of making this famous hero [Ulysses] the primary focus in his poem, M. René Fauchois made Pénélope the principal figure of the drama, and this drama seems to transpire, not in the palace of Ithaca, but, if one may put it this way, in the soul of the queen."⁷⁹

Arthur Pougin, writing for *Le Ménestrel*, is another reviewer who offered effusive praise for Fauchois and described in detail why he found the libretto so successful:

⁷⁷Nectoux, *Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, 314.

⁷⁸Boschot, *L'Echo de Paris*, 4.

⁷⁹F. Fauré, *Le Petit Parisien*, 6 March 1913, 2.

Fauchois seemed predestined to become a librettist...his poem is written in verse, elegant and expressive. Such is this poem, serious without austerity, simple, sober, well designed without superfluous incidents...It avoids all excess, all turgidity. It is poetry that communicates sometimes severity, sometimes calm, sometimes grace, but always an exquisite sense of serenity.⁸⁰

Given that Fauré made extensive edits to the text, we must ask whom these critics are actually praising. Certainly Fauré deserves some of the credit for the final result, but at the time *Pénélope* premiered no one, aside from a few members of the composer's inner circle, would have known about his revisions. Given that the critics did not cite specific passages in the text when discussing the libretto, there is no way to measure the impact of Fauré's edits on the opera's reception.

What we can conclude from the reviews is that despite Fauchois' youth, inexperience, and unconventional approach to his source material, the libretto did not negatively affect *Pénélope's* overall reception. The general consensus was that the librettist had created a work of true poetry; critics felt that its intimacy, psychological subtlety, and emotional restraint were perfectly suited to Fauré's compositional style.⁸¹ This opinion is nicely summarized in Alfred Bruneau's review for *Le Matin*: "The Homeric poem of M. René Fauchois, from which the typical dramatic vicissitudes are

⁸⁰Arthur Pougin, *Le Ménestrel* (17 May 1913), 155.

⁸¹Boschot is an exception, with his obvious displeasure over the absence of the Gods. Other exceptions include Jean Marnold, writing for *Le mercure de France*, who found the libretto mediocre, and Arthur Neisser (the lone German critic) who condemns the libretto at length for its self-indulgence and unnecessary excesses.

excluded, but which is instead animated by an inner fire and genuine lyricism, best advances, I think, the free genius of M. Gabriel Fauré.”⁸²

Melody and Harmony: Fauré’s Vocabulary

In his early survey of Fauré’s career, Paul Landormy made an astute observation about his protagonist as an opera composer: “He had no illusions about himself. He knew he was not originating a new type of composition; but in a type invented by others, and so many times repeated, he was to express himself through language quite new in its melodic turn and in its harmony.”⁸³ This view reflects Fauré’s own vision of himself, as demonstrated in his letters. It is also supported by what we find in the press reviews: the overwhelming majority of critics writing in 1913 praise the individuality of Fauré’s musical language. They find that his melodies and the harmonies that enrich them are the aspect of *Pénélope* that most clearly distinguish it from its predecessors.

In his biography of Fauré, Nectoux summarizes what he believes to be the predominant characteristics of the opera’s musical style, which stem from his study of the score. His conclusion, quoted below, is enlightening, because it touches upon a feature that *Pénélope*’s early critics also noticed and discussed frequently in their reviews:

The truth is that Fauré follows the psychological development of his characters so faithfully as to render analysis futile. In particular the harmonic language changes practically from bar to bar. His continual use of chromaticism loosens the feeling of tonality and leads to a kind of “disorientation,” a rendering in

⁸²Alfred Bruneau, “Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, l’altière et pure beauté de *Pénélope* provoque un immense enthousiasme,” *Le Matin*, 10 May 1913, 5.

⁸³Paul Landormy, “Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924),” *The Musical Quarterly* 3 (July 1931), 295.

purely musical terms of the emotional upheaval suffered by both hero and heroine.⁸⁴

Like the biographer, critic Louis de Fourcaud (*Le Gaulois*) was impressed with Fauré's ability to bring the characters to life. He commended the "subtle, ingenious, and touching methods that Fauré has used in his music to always clearly show the meaning of the action... He paints Pénélope as human yet always majestic." The reviewer went on to describe Fauré's musical vocabulary more generally: "One knows his penetrating manner, his sinuous melodic ideas... enveloped in his multi-faceted and deliciously iridescent harmonies. His art searches for the hidden meanings of the words and makes them visible through a mirage of colors."⁸⁵

Like Fourcaud, Adolphe Jullien was taken with the emotional impact of Fauré's descriptive musical vocabulary. Referring to Ulysses' melodies, he wrote: "His lines are so clear, so angular, the edges so sharp, and therefore able to move us." He continued:

The entire work, with its subtle harmonies of delicate embroidery, was executed by the hand of a master, as might be expected of a musician as refined as the author of *La Bonne chanson*. One senses that Fauré, who happily composed *Pénélope* at his leisure, in joy and serenity, has placed in his characters all he could of concentrated affection and growing love.⁸⁶

⁸⁴Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 323; see pages 316-26 for a detailed musical analysis of each act. Robert Orledge also offers a close analysis in his biography, *Gabriel Fauré*, 150-62.

⁸⁵Fourcaud, *Le Gaulois*, 11 May 1913, 2.

⁸⁶Jullien, *Le Journal des débats*, 2. Jullien's assumption that Fauré composed *Pénélope* "at his leisure in joy and serenity" is clearly a misconception, based on what the letters tell us. Fauré worked tirelessly during the summer months since, as we know, he did not work on the opera during the months of the academic year. His letters also reveal that he felt pressure and frustration despite his flexible deadline.

Critic Henri de Curzon, writing for *Le Guide musical*, compared *Pénélope*'s score to Fauré's late songs, finding that the opera captures the "lyric quality of Fauré's *mélodies* and the characteristic harmonies of their accompaniments."⁸⁷ Alfred Bruneau similarly views the score as an extension of the composer's mature style, particularly in its use of wandering tonality and melodic sophistication. At the same time, like several of his fellow critics, he found that the music was characterized by an underlying simplicity:

In his latest score, nothing recalls his first *mélodies*; this allows us to recognize and admire the strength of his enlightened character... The music is of harmonious and serious splendor. Never vociferous nor declamatory, regally dignified and noble; it has vigor and rare clarity. Despite the rather complex appearance of his often polyphonic character, and despite the inexhaustible richness of his modulations, it remains, in reality, quite simple.⁸⁸

Pierre Blois, critic for *L'Autorité* is drawn to Fauré's "strange and beautiful sonorities." Henri Quittard also finds an element of mystery in Fauré's musical language, describing it as "rare and most unusual." He continues:

Those to whom music is no stranger cannot ignore the originality of style, the color of these truly personal harmonies; not revolutionary, yet so rich. These gentle, subtle, strangely strong and penetrating melodies reveal new horizons... Simplicity and exactitude are found on every page... Fauré uses precisely what is needed and nothing more. This marvelous economy of means, which is revealed in pure lines and tightly designed melodies...never tends toward excess or tumult. His moderation

⁸⁷Henri de Curzon, "*Pénélope* de Gabriel Fauré au Théâtre du Casino de Monte-Carlo," *Le Guide musical*, 10 (9 March 1913), 198, in Phillips, 325.

⁸⁸Bruneau, *Le Matin*, 10.

is eminently classical, but this does not exclude, under the hand of a master, heat, emotion, or picturesque color.⁸⁹

Critic Claude Avenaz, writing for *Bulletin de la semaine politique*, applauded Fauré for renewing and revitalizing what he calls *les anciennes formules de composition*.⁹⁰ Like Bruneau, he commented on Fauré's rich harmonic language, observing that it seems to flow from him with impressive ease. Arthur Pougin similarly described *Pénélope* as "very modulatory" but in a way that "never spills into the wild and strange." He delighted in Fauré's "picturesque harmonies" for exhibiting a "true modernism that is never outrageous," and goes on to laud Fauré for finding a musical language that strikes a perfect balance between classicism and modernity:

Finally we are in the presence of a sane and comforting work, which will rest the wanderings, the aberrations and convulsions of the so-called "new school," a work that does not insolently trample the fundamental principles of music... What a joy to be able to understand what one means, and at the same time not having the ear drum torn, the ears scratched, by exasperating sonorities, by a succession of chords and couplings of notes that howl when found together... One could say that the style of this great artist is that of a classic, that is to say, of a traditionalist who does not retreat from novelty on the condition that it does

⁸⁹Henri Quittard, "Les Théâtres—Théâtre de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*," *Le Figaro*, 6 March 1913, 5.

⁹⁰Claude Avenaz, "La vie intellectuelle et artistique—Chronique musicale: La *Pénélope* de M. Gabriel Fauré," *Bulletin de la semaine politique, sociale et religieuse* 20 (14 May 1913), 238, in Phillips, 320. Here "les anciennes formules de composition" is best understood as "early" or "past" formulas of composition. Although Avenaz does not say what specific time period he is referring to, it is likely that he means the mid-eighteenth century. This is supported by the fact that he compares Fauré's music to Rameau and Gluck.

not lapse into eccentricity, and that the musical language maintains its elegance and its clarity.⁹¹

This passage, while indicative of Pougin’s conservatism, shows that he was not disturbed by Fauré’s rapidly shifting, often chromatic harmonies.

Critic Xavier Leroux finds that Fauré’s harmonic language is a product of his contrapuntal style and suggests that “*Pénélope* succeeds because the modulations are so logical that they are never a distraction to the listener.”⁹² Although his view was shared by the majority of critics, as evident from the discussion above, at least one listener found Fauré’s harmonic vocabulary insufferable.

In a letter to his friend Charles Lecocq dated 12 March 1913, Saint-Saëns writes of *Pénélope*:

In travelling through all the keys without stopping, one experiences an insuperable fatigue. Just as Grétry would have given a louis to hear a chanterelle, so I would give two just to be able to rest for a moment on tonic!⁹³

These words remind us that, as we saw in chapter one, not all listeners responded favorably to Fauré’s increasingly elusive harmonies. Saint-Saëns’ assessment of *Pénélope*’s musical language seems to be an outlier, however. Most other critics found it

⁹¹Pougin, *Le Ménestrel*, 155. In this quote Pougin uses the term “classicism” to refer Fauré’s sense of proportion, balance, and clarity—the qualities that several other critics cite when linking his opera to those by Rameau, Lully, and Gluck.

⁹²Xavier Leroux, “La musique au théâtre: *Pénélope*,” *Musica* 30 (July 1913): 142, in Phillips, 331.

⁹³Orledge, *Gabriel Fauré*, 35. Saint-Saëns refers to a remark made by André Grétry after he heard Méhul’s *Uthal* at the Opéra in 1806. As Orledge points out, the “chanterelle” is the French nickname for the top (E) string on the violin. Méhul’s opera used no orchestral violins, thus Grétry remark implied that he would give anything to hear a melodic line, just as Saint-Saëns would give anything to hear a passage of tonal stability in *Pénélope*.

to be one of the work's greatest strengths; but, as we will soon discover, these same critics had strong opinions about how Fauré's harmonies were "dressed."

Orchestration

As we saw in chapter 1, Fauré wrote very few works for large instrumental forces and thus did not have extensive experience as an orchestrator. Because of this one might assume that the task of orchestrating *Pénélope* would be a source of frustration for the aging composer; his letters, however, suggest that at times he welcomed the job. He once described orchestrating Act 1 as "enjoyable work"⁹⁴ and wrote to his wife that "when I have completed the composition [of Act 3], I shall begin the orchestration, which will seem a pleasure, a relief, a relaxation."⁹⁵ His words imply that orchestrating came as a relief when compared to the more intellectually strenuous act of composing.

Although he enjoyed the work, Fauré realized that he would not be able to finish the orchestration in time for the Monte Carlo premiere in March 1913. A letter to his wife, dated 6 September 1912, reveals his growing panic:

It's terrifying what remains to be done! The fifty pages of orchestration, which I had in hand, was written two years ago here, when I was so worried about grandfather's illness! I just have to re-do them, they're worthless! I have already restarted this job and have 30 pages in front of me, completed. But just

⁹⁴From a letter Fauré wrote to his wife on 9 August 1909, published in Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*, 135.

⁹⁵From a letter Fauré wrote to his wife on 8 August 1912, published in Jones, 146.

think, there will be a *thousand*, probably! Often I have to think for hours over just four bars!⁹⁶

To complete the orchestration in time, Fauré enlisted the help of Fernand Pécoud, a composition student of Vincent d'Indy's. Working under Fauré's close supervision, Pécoud was charged with completing the orchestration for the second half of Act 2 and the final scene of Act 3.⁹⁷ It is significant that the sections assigned to this young collaborator carry the majority of the opera's action; we can speculate that Fauré had focused his efforts on the scenes that came to him most naturally, leaving Pécoud the scenes that the older composer least enjoyed orchestrating. This is consistent with Fauré's acknowledgment that he had trouble creating music for dramatic effect: once again we get the sense that he was more comfortable envisioning scenes of introspection and emotional depth than moments of intense activity.

Pénélope calls for a moderately large orchestra with two flutes, a piccolo, two oboes, an English horn, two clarinets in B-flat, a bass clarinet, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, harp, percussion, and a full complement of strings. As Nectoux observes, Fauré uses these instrumental forces to recreate the "sumptuous orchestral textures of the Wagnerian musical drama."⁹⁸ However, the thicker textures associated with Wagner's orchestra are reserved for moments of overwhelming emotional intensity and climaxes in the action. Most of the time, Fauré uses "a kind of expanded chamber

⁹⁶Jones, 147.

⁹⁷Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 332.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 316.

orchestra” with the oboe, horns, or trumpet carrying melodic interest over a large, divided string section.⁹⁹

Although Fauré did not directly discuss his hybrid approach, his frequent use of pared-down instrumental forces would have highlighted his strengths as a chamber-music composer, thereby compensating for his inexperience as an orchestrator of larger symphonic works. He worried, however, that his rather understated orchestration would lack warmth and richness when realized by the full ensemble. It was not until the first orchestral rehearsal in February 1913 that Fauré could evaluate his work as it was intended to be heard. He was pleased with the results and excitedly told Marie that Léon Jehin, conductor of the Monte Carlo premiere, was surprised to find the simple orchestration so sonorous.¹⁰⁰

As the 1913 reviews reveal, when discussing Fauré’s orchestration critics focused on what they wanted (or expected) to hear in the orchestra. Some critics found his approach beautifully simple and pure, some criticized it as too reserved and colorless, and some praised its richness and power. In addition to demonstrating the personal biases of the reviewers, perhaps this wide range of opinion also reflects a certain stylistic discontinuity in Fauré’s approach. Although most critics agreed that Fauré effectively used the orchestra to reflect the action and emotion showcased on stage, they seem to suggest that the composer had not quite found his voice as an orchestrator. The listener finds him wavering between the subtle orchestral colors found in Debussy’s *Pelléas*, and the denser, more ornate textures inherent in a Wagnerian music drama.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Jones, *Gabriel Fauré: A Life in Letters*, 148.

Arthur Neisser faulted Fauré's orchestration for layering color upon color indiscriminately, a method that he felt resulted in a general lack of unity and clarity.¹⁰¹ Critic Jean Marnold, writing for *Le Mercure de France*, complained that the orchestration came across as "too sober and lacking in impact and variety... M. Gabriel Fauré's orchestra sounds like chamber music."¹⁰² Marnold goes on to suggest that this quality of *Pénélope's* score is an example of an underlying classicism¹⁰³ that was "the closest possible match for Fauré's inspiration, and it is after all a fact that M. Fauré has never orchestrated in any other way." The implication of this statement is clear enough: the critic alleged that Fauré was too old-fashioned and rigid to attempt a more modern and compelling approach to orchestration. This judgment takes on a new meaning when we consider that Marnold was an ardent supporter of Maurice Ravel, the young innovator who represented the newest generation of French composers. Ravel studied composition with Fauré at the Conservatoire, but quickly surpassed his mentor in the art of orchestrating. Indeed, when compared with Ravel's pioneering methods, *Pénélope's* orchestration does appear rather conservative and rooted in an older tradition. Marnold's critique reflects his individual taste, while simultaneously taking aim at Fauré's ability as a composer.

Charles Koechlin, Fauré's ardent admirer and former student, criticized the orchestration more discretely in his review for the *Gazette des beauxarts*. He wrote:

¹⁰¹Arthur Neisser, "Pénélope...Musik von Gabriel Fauré," *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 11 (12 March 1913), 401, in Phillips, 332.

¹⁰²Jean Marnold, "Musique—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *Le Mercure de France*, 16 June 1913, translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 332.

¹⁰³Critics used the terms "classic" and "classicism" frequently when discussing *Pénélope*. Most often this refers to Fauré's stylistic connection to music of the late-Baroque and early-Classical periods—particularly his sense of restraint, proportion, and clarity. This is the context for Marnold's statement. The term is also used to refer to the aesthetic of ancient Greece; when necessary, the distinction will be pointed out.

As with several other great composers, the work's beauty does not depend on orchestral colours; there is something intimate and profound about it, shining out from pure timbres... In spite of many a happy detail, I don't find in the opera's orchestration the simplicity, the grandeur, the complete mastery or the charm that reside in the notes. Or rather, it is only in the notes that I find these qualities realized to their full extent.¹⁰⁴

Fauré responded to this review in an unpublished letter to Koechlin dated 10 September 1913:

You have blunted and cushioned your criticism so that only a professional musician would recognize it as such. Nonetheless, you're right. I know myself well enough to have been aware of this fault (a fault of nature, clearly) on more than one occasion. Alas, at my age I shan't have the time to do anything about it!¹⁰⁵

Here, Fauré shows himself to be well aware that orchestration was not his greatest strength. Koechlin's review astutely points out that the quality of Fauré's musical language was as strong as ever in *Pénélope*, but he was simply not sure enough of his abilities as an orchestrator to use his instrumental forces to full effect. Although this assessment seems consistent with what one hears in the score, it is important to note that not all critics agreed.

In a review from *Le Petit Parisien* Fauré is commended for his "perfect knowledge of powerful and nuanced orchestration."¹⁰⁶ August Germaine (*L'Echo de*

¹⁰⁴Charles Koechlin, "Chronique musicale—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *Gazette des beaux-arts* 673 (July 1913), translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 333.

¹⁰⁵This is taken from an unpublished letter dated 10 September 1913. The text was communicated by Mme. Li-Koechlin and is translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 333.

¹⁰⁶F. Fauré, "A l'Opéra de Monte Carlo... *Pénélope*," *Le Petit Parisien*, 6 March 1913, 6.

Paris) writes that in *Pénélope* “the science of orchestration is joined with the most pure, most elevated inspiration.”¹⁰⁷ Camille Bellaigue, writing for *Revue des deux mondes*, felt that the orchestration reflected the tasteful restraint found throughout the opera: “The exquisite pages of [Fauré’s] work are made of few notes, but they are carefully chosen.”¹⁰⁸

Critic Louis de Fourcaud was impressed with the clarity and warmth of Fauré’s orchestration, in which each line is easily perceived by the listener: “The orchestra envelopes the seductive voices, so that nothing is ever lost.”¹⁰⁹ Arthur Pougin similarly praised Fauré for his thoughtful treatment of the instrumental accompaniment, writing that the composer “takes care not to cover, under any circumstance, the voice with the orchestra. Nevertheless, the orchestra is always interesting, fertile and rich in details of all kinds.”¹¹⁰ It is important to note that Pougin was openly conservative in his musical tastes; he was likely pleased to find in Fauré’s orchestration familiar techniques borrowed from the masters of the late-Classical and Romantic periods.

As the passages above demonstrate, critics had wide-ranging opinions about Fauré’s effectiveness as an orchestrator. One thing is clear, however: orchestration was not the area in which Fauré proved to be an innovator. Luckily, Fauré’s conservative approach was not seen as a fatal flaw by critics, and did not significantly impact their judgments of the opera as a whole.

¹⁰⁷August Germaine, “Les premières à Monte-Carlo—Opéra de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*...musique de Gabriel Fauré,” *Echo de Paris*, 5 March 1913, 2.

¹⁰⁸Camille Bellaigue, “Revue musicale—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*,” *Revue des deux mondes*, 16 (1 July 1913), 219, in Phillips, 321.

¹⁰⁹Louis de Fourcaud, *Le Gaulois*, 5 March 1913, 4.

¹¹⁰Arthur Pougin,” *Le Ménestrel* (17 May 1913), 155.

Critics' Overall Impressions

Up to this point, we have examined the aspects of *Pénélope*'s score that were singled out—either for praise or disapproval—by its early critics. It would now be useful to survey the critics' impressions of the opera as a whole, particularly when it comes to some common themes sounded by the press. Several critics praise Fauré for capturing what they imagined to be the essence of ancient Greece. They also describe his work as noble, majestic, pure, and rooted in the classical tradition,¹¹¹ characterizing the composer's aesthetic as an extension of Rameau's and Gluck's. Even critics who faulted certain individual aspects of the opera—its libretto, orchestration, or its lack of dramatic impact—hailed the work as Fauré's *magnum opus*, and a masterpiece in its own right. For instance, Arthur Aderer (*Le Petit Parisien*), described what he found most notable in *Pénélope* as follows:

Two words describe Gabriel Fauré's score: pure and noble. Pure and noble, yet never severe and cold. It testifies to a sensitivity and at the same time a grace, a delicacy that reaffirms his originality. All the purity, all the harmony, all the perfection of Greek art live in it, not through conventional formulas, but through a deep sense of ancient poetry. It is not, as one of the stage hands said of the first dress rehearsal, the appearance and clothing of Greece that the composer recreates; it is the soul he brings back to life. And it is its original sentiment, its exquisite and penetrating ancient beauty, its poetry, its order and rhythm, that create *Pénélope*'s charm, and makes it unique among the operas of today.¹¹²

¹¹¹Here this term refers to the Classical period of Western European music.

¹¹²Aderer, *Le Petit Parisien*, 2.

As we can see from this passage, the opera's subject matter prompted critics to judge its general aesthetic against their imagined concept of ancient Greece. We find similar comparisons in reviews by Charles Koechlin (*Gazette des beauxarts*), Jean Drault (*Le Libre parole*), and Adolphe Jullien (*Le Journal des débats*).¹¹³ Pierre Lalo dubbed *Pénélope* “the embodiment of the aesthetic ideal of ancient Greece,”¹¹⁴ and Émile Vuillermoz described it as having *une atmosphère de pur hellénisme*.¹¹⁵

Gaston Carraud, critic for *La Liberté*, offered a somewhat more precise definition of the opera's alleged ancient roots, arguing that Fauré's inspiration was drawn not from the Greek tragedy, but rather from Hellenic art and architecture.¹¹⁶ Perhaps the critic makes this distinction to emphasize the composer's balanced proportions and clean lines, the qualities that come across more clearly in *Pénélope* than the dramatic character one would expect to find in a setting of Homer's epic. Regardless of Carraud's reasoning, his supposition is not supported by Fauré's writings; the composer never discusses Greek art or architecture as an inspiration. Carraud, like some of his colleagues, makes the mistake of ascribing intentions to the composer as if they were Fauré's own.

Alfred Bruneau (*Le Matin*) also compares *Pénélope* to Greek architecture, but finds this connection to be primarily an outgrowth of Fauré's classicism. In a passage that conflates “lines” in sculpture with “lines” in music, Bruneau writes:

It evokes, with its calm and ample lines, antique Greek statues. It is therefore a classic, but without stiffness or bareness. It is also

¹¹³Charles Koechlin, *Gazette des beauxarts*, 78; Jean Drault, “Les Premières—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*,” *Le Libre parole*, 11 May 1913; Jullien Adolphe, *Le Journal des débats*, 2.

¹¹⁴Lalo, *Les Temps*, 3.

¹¹⁵Émile Vuillermoz, “Les Théâtres...*Pénélope*,” *Bulletin SIM*, May 1913, 60, in Phillips, 338.

¹¹⁶Gaston Carraud, “*Pénélope*,” *La Liberté*, 12 May 1913, 2, in Phillips, 323.

modern, but without bravado or bizarreness. It has a kind of eloquence that goes far in us, that captivates and excites. And what unity of style, what diversity of sentiment it possesses!... It is his one true masterpiece.¹¹⁷

Here Bruneau sounds similar to Pougin, who applauded Fauré for embracing modernity without abandoning musical traditions of the past.

Adolphe Boschot, reviewing for *L'Echo de Paris*, was immediately convinced of *Pénélope*'s excellence:

By the first measures, one feels that the work is of a master. In the introduction, the quartet reflects Pénélope's pain and longing with a power that is at once Tristanesque and Fauréan--and immediately the tone of the work is elevated, and imposing, with a sovereign and smiling authority: one is already taken by Fauré's charm.¹¹⁸

It is important to note that *L'Echo de Paris* was a strongly nationalist publication and appealed primarily to bourgeois socialites.¹¹⁹ As we will see in chapter 3, Fauré was a favorite of the nationalists because many considered his music to be the embodiment of French cultural values. Although it is unclear whether or not Adolphe Boschot shared the politics of his paper, we can be sure that he knew who he was writing for and cannot discount the possibility that this might have impacted his review. Boschot was not alone in his assessment of *Pénélope* as a powerful, yet charming work, however.

¹¹⁷Bruneau, *Le Matin*, 10.

¹¹⁸Boschot, *L'Echo de Paris*, 10 May 1913, 4.

¹¹⁹Jann Pasler, "Pelléas and Power: Forces Behind the Reception of Debussy's Opera," *19th Century Music* 3 (Spring 1987), 247.

Louis Laloy, critic for *Grand revue*, applauded the score for reconciling power and delicacy,¹²⁰ while Xavier Leroux found that in *Pénélope*, Fauré exhibits more intensity than ever before, “but with no loss of charm.”¹²¹ August Germaine writes: “There is a whole atmosphere of an enveloping and captivating charm which we cannot resist.”¹²² The lure of Fauré’s style also captivated Arthur Pougin, who was particularly drawn to the opera’s sense of restraint: “He does not seek to astound, he seeks to charm and he succeeds. All of his work is truly seductive, and it is this quality of seduction that has made it such a legitimate success.”¹²³

Earlier in this chapter, we saw that Fauré’s musical language was often described as simple, refined, noble, and classic. These are the same qualities that many critics used to define *Pénélope* as a whole. Georges Boyer, critic for *Le Petit journal*, called the opera “pure” and of “noble simplicity,”¹²⁴ while Michel D. Calvocoressi found that the “austere simplicity” of the opera’s subject was an ideal match for the “high classicism” of Fauré’s style.¹²⁵ Jean Darnaudat argued that the work exhibited an “intensity clothed in simplicity.”¹²⁶ Jules Méry, another critic for *Le Petit journal*, characterized the work as *d’une noble sévérite*. Louis Schneider, whose review appeared in five different

¹²⁰Louis Laloy, “La musique—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope* de M. Gabriel Fauré,” *Grand revue* 10 (25 May 1913), 403, in Phillips 330.

¹²¹Leroux, *Musica*, 142.

¹²²Germaine, *L’Echo de Paris*.

¹²³Pougin, *Le Ménestrel* (17 May 1913 – 23 May 1913), 5.

¹²⁴Georges Boyer, “Premières Représentations: Théâtre des Champs-Élysées—*Pénélope*,” *Le Petit journal*, 11 May 1913, 11, in Phillips, 323.

¹²⁵Michel D. Calvocoressi, “Les Grandes premières à l’Opéra de Monte-Carlo: *Pénélope*,” *Comoedia illustré* 12 (20 March 1913): 560, in Phillips, 323.

¹²⁶Jean Darnaudat, “Les premières—Theater des Champs-Elysees: *Pénélope* par Gabriel Fauré,” *L’Action Française*, 10 May 1913, in Phillips. 325.

publications, described the opera as being in the *style classique*, praising its “classic nobility.”¹²⁷

The critics who described Fauré’s style as “classic” also tended to liken his aesthetic to that of Rameau, and Gluck. For instance, the critic for *Le Petit Parisien* writes: “With its clear style, broad and firm declamation, *Pénélope* is directly connected to the work of Rameau and Gluck...the atmosphere of the entire work is serious and majestic.”¹²⁸ After attending a reading of the opera in November 1912 at Lucienne Bréval’s residence, critic Georges Pioch reported that the score’s lyric grace reminded him of Gluck.¹²⁹ Paul Souday argued that Fauré captures the classicism of Rameau,¹³⁰ echoing Gaston Carraud who insisted that *Pénélope* is “comparable only with the works of Gluck and Rameau.”¹³¹

Composer and critic, Reynaldo Hahn, offered a similar view in *Le Journal*, arguing that Fauré as an opera composer can best be categorized in relation to Gluck rather than to Meyerbeer or Puccini.¹³² This brings us to an issue that many critics attempted to address: how was *Pénélope*’s genre to be defined?

After examining the available reviews, it appears that only one critic used the term *grand opera* to describe the work. As we learned in chapter 1, many critics opened

¹²⁷Louis Schneider, “Les grandes premières: *Pénélope* à l’Opera de Monte-Carlo,” *Étoile belge*, 7 March 1913, in Phillips, 336.

¹²⁸F.Fauré. *Petit Parisien*, 6.

¹²⁹Georges Pioch, “Une Lecture de *Pénélope*,” *Gil blas*, 7 November 1912, 1, in Phillips, 334.

¹³⁰Paul Souday, “Les premières—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*,” *L’Éclair*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 337.

¹³¹Carraud, *La liberté*, 2.

¹³²Reynaldo Hahn, “La Musique, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*,” *Le Journal*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 328.

their reviews by applauding Fauré for succeeding in his first attempt at opera composition, but, like Reynaldo Hahn, they are often careful to distinguish *Pénélope* from the grand-opera tradition. The critics for *L'Action* and *The Daily Mail* both label the opera *un poème musical*, but find that it still suits the theater.¹³³

Some critics handle the issue of categorization by placing the opera in a league of its own. Camille Bellaigue, who described *Pénélope* as *un poème élégiaque*, placed it in the category of *opéras libérateurs*—works that he considered truly “one of a kind,”¹³⁴ listing *Fidelio*, *Freischütz*, and *Guillaume Tell*, among them. Pierre Blois, critic for *L'Autorité*, calls *Pénélope* “a splendid work in an entirely new form,”¹³⁵ while Louis de Fourcaud exclaims: “Here we have a truly original work.”¹³⁶

It is interesting that many critics felt the need to convince their readers that *Pénélope* belonged on the operatic stage. The fact that Fauré was entering the Parisian opera world for the first time was one obvious reason for this: we know from chapter 1 that critics and audience members alike were skeptical about the ability of this master of salon forms to conquer the theater. It is also possible that some critics felt the need to defend Fauré’s intimate approach, proving that it could succeed on a larger stage.

The reviews examined throughout this chapter show that *Pénélope* was received with approval, and even with enthusiasm, by the vast majority of the critics who reviewed the work in 1913. Even the two areas that inspired the most substantial disagreement—

¹³³Charley [?], “Théâtre des Champs-Élysées—*Pénélope*,” *L'action*, 10 May 1913, in Phillips, 324; Anon, “*Pénélope*: M. Gabriel Fauré’s Music,” *Daily Mail*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 319.

¹³⁴Bellaigue, *Revue des deux mondes*, 262.

¹³⁵Pierre Blois, “La Musique—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: première représentation de *Pénélope*,” *L'Autorité*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 322.

¹³⁶Fourcaud, *Le Gaulois*, 3.

the librettist's handling of Homer's original story, and the opera's orchestration—are not the aspects of the work that would make or break its success. Their apparent ambivalence about Fauré's treatment of the operatic dramaturgy is of consequence, however. Although Fauré was almost unanimously praised for creating a score of the highest caliber, it remains unclear if the critics felt that *Pénélope* succeeded as a work for the theater. Some clarity can be gained by examining the broader French opera world at the turn of the century. Thus, the next chapter broadens our scope and explores the critics' frame of reference when reviewing a work in this genre.

Chapter 3: Opera in Paris: Late Nineteenth to Early Twentieth Century

Before turning our attention to the details surrounding *Pénélope*'s 1913 premieres—in Monte Carlo, then Paris—it is essential to gain a broader understanding of the Parisian opera scene during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This historical background will help situate Fauré's *Pénélope* within a broader cultural context, allowing for a fuller grasp of the assumptions and expectations of the Parisian music press.

The operatic stages of Paris reflected the demographic and ideological shifts that were reshaping cultural life in the city at the turn of the twentieth century. Census figures show that the population of Paris expanded by more than a million people between 1872 and 1911, growing from 1,851,792 to 2,888,110. This population surge included a steady flow of immigrants from Germany, Italy, central Europe, and later, Russia.¹³⁷ As a major center of European cultural life, Paris also attracted droves of tourists who came in search of first-rate entertainment. Opera theaters responded to this diversifying population by offering a wide range of repertoire by master composers, performed at the highest possible level: on any given weekend, Parisians could hear works by Gluck, Rossini, Wagner, and Saint-Saëns.

At circa 1900, two opera houses were best positioned to meet the public's high expectations: the *Académie nationale de musique*, known as the "Opéra," and the *Théâtre nationale de l'Opéra-Comique* known simply as the "Opéra-Comique."¹³⁸ These two

¹³⁷ Scott W. Haine, *The History of France* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 132.

¹³⁸ Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

main houses wielded the strongest influence on Parisian operatic life, due to the impressive scope of their programming and the financial support they received from the state: 800,000 francs for the Opéra and 300,000 for the Opéra-Comique. With this state money came a mandate: each company had to produce a certain number of new French operas by contemporary composers each season. Thus French opera maintained a strong presence in Paris despite the city's growing cosmopolitanism.

Each season offered a mixture of foreign operas and national favorites. Grand opera, from home and abroad, maintained a steady presence in Paris from the time Auber's *La Muette de Portici* introduced the genre to French audiences in 1828. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, opera houses were still relying on works such as Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829), Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836), and Donizetti's *La favorite* (1840), to bring in steady audiences. Verdi was a particularly strong presence through the turn of the century. The Opéra commissioned two grand operas from the Italian composer, *Les Vêpres siciliennes* in 1855 and *Don Carlos* in 1867, which were performed regularly alongside his other popular works, including *Macbeth* (1847), *La Traviata* (1853) and *Otello* (1887).

French grand opera began to fall out of favor as the turn of the century neared and a new crop of operas emerged to take its place. Ambroise Thomas's *Mignon* (1866), Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), and Massenet's *Manon* (1884) and *Werther* (1892) were among the most widely popular during the early 1900s.¹³⁹ With their literary themes and a

¹³⁹Richard Langham Smith, "French Operatic Spectacle in the Twentieth Century," in *French Music Since Berlioz*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter, 117-60 (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 118.

heightened sense of realism, these new works provided an alternative to the exaggerated grandiosity that had characterized French opera since the 1830s.¹⁴⁰

Another significant development took place in 1900 when the Opéra, housed at the *Palais Garnier*, gave an excerpt from Gluck's *Alceste* for the first time since its Paris premiere in 1776. *Alceste*'s success inspired revivals of several other operas from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including national treasures by Rameau, Rousseau, and Lully. Many contemporary French composers turned to these early works for inspiration, adopting elements of Baroque and Classical opera in their own compositions.

Of the changes taking place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, none was more significant than the introduction of Wagner to the Parisian operatic stage. The premiere of *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra in 1861 was met with whistles, catcalls, and general hostility, forcing Wagner to withdraw the work after only three performances. In the aftermath of the scandalous premiere, several influential French writers penned essays either supporting or condemning Wagner's arrival in Paris. Charles Baudelaire was particularly fascinated by *Tannhäuser* and emerged as one of its most vocal supporters. This paved the way for his symbolist disciples' love affair with Wagner in the 1880s.¹⁴¹

The controversy surrounding *Tannhäuser* began what would become a long and complex relationship between Paris and the German master. Every new French opera composed at the turn of the century had to grapple with Wagner's influence. The works that were seen as too derivative died on the vine; among these Chabrier's *Gwendoline*

¹⁴⁰See Hervé Lancombe's chapter "The Parisian Operatic World," in *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 209-25, for a detailed discussion of an aesthetic shift taking place in French opera during the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴¹Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 11.

(1886) and Chausson's *Le Roi Arthur* (1903) emerged as two of the most egregious imitations. Even Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902), hailed as the first viable alternative to the Wagnerian opera model, could not fully escape his clutches.

Nationalism and the Campaign against Wagner

In 1870 the Second French Empire fell, giving way to the French Third Republic that lasted until 1940, when World War II brought German and Italian occupation to France. The regime change took place in the midst of the Franco-Prussian war, which began on 19 July 1870 and ended with France's defeat on 10 May 1871. In the aftermath of the war, the government of the Third Republic became deeply concerned with regenerating political, civil, and artistic life in France. Opera became a vital cultural artifact in this climate; it was seen as the key to regaining national identity and restoring a sense of pride to French citizens.¹⁴²

The intensely nationalist character of France's new government played a substantial role in shaping what the opera world looked like in turn-of-the-century Paris. Opera houses became a place where music and politics intermingled. As a meeting place for government officials and a venue for entertaining foreign dignitaries, it was an extension of the state, as it had been since Jean-Baptiste Lully joined the court of King Louis XIV. As Jann Pasler argues, opera was recognized by the state as a powerful "political tool for lauding French music over German music."¹⁴³ It is important to point out that in this context "German music" was synonymous with "Wagner."

¹⁴²Barbara L. Kelly, "Introduction," 5.

¹⁴³Jann Pasler, "Pelléas and Power: Forces Behind the Reception of Debussy's Opera," *19th Century Music* 3 (Spring 1987), 259.

Wagner became a convenient scapegoat in the nationalist campaign against German influence in France. Immediately following the war, the nationalists achieved a temporary ban on his operas in Paris. Although Wagner had returned in the 1880s, his music remained a highly politicized topic in the years between the Franco-Prussian War and World War I: supporting Wagner's music was seen by many nationalists as defiantly unpatriotic during an era when France's security was threatened by Germany.¹⁴⁴

Gounod, Massenet, and Saint-Saëns were perhaps the most well-known and outspoken critics of Wagnerian influence in France. Each of these three composers acknowledged Wagner's genius in the realm of opera, but they fervently believed that *Wagnerisme* was a dangerous trend with the potential to stifle French national culture. Massenet felt it was his duty as a professor at the Conservatoire to protect his students from the lure of Wagner. In an interview with *Le Figaro* in 1884 he stated that he had to "keep them bridled until, through a slow initiation to taste, tact, and measure that are distinctive characteristics of French genius, they may explore, without risk, these new worlds, full of real seductions but also of deceiving mirages."¹⁴⁵

Beneath the anti-Wagnerians' nationalistic tone there existed a genuine anxiety about the viability of their own works. Gounod, for instance, felt that Wagner's presence in Paris sounded a death knell for French composers: "How frightening he is! this man of stone who advances with dull and relentless step like fate."¹⁴⁶ Saint-Saëns was similarly unsettled by Wagner's introduction to French audiences. According to fellow composer

¹⁴⁴Marion Schmid, "À bas Wagner!: The French Press Campaign against Wagner during World War I," in *French Music, Culture and National Identity, 1870-1939*, ed. Barbara L. Kelly (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 78.

¹⁴⁵Interview with Parisis (pseudonym for Émile Blavet), "La Vie parisienne," *Le Figaro*, 19 January 1884, trans. in Huebner, 69.

¹⁴⁶Charles Gounod, *Le Don Juan de Mozart* (Paris, 1890, repr. 1980), translated in Huebner, 202.

Henri Duparc, he exclaimed: “But the day when Wagner is performed in Paris, what will become of all the rest of us?”¹⁴⁷

In the years leading up to World War I, Saint-Saëns became particularly vocal about the dangers of Wagner’s musical presence in France. He published several articles for *L’Echo de Paris*, arguing that for nearly forty years the French public’s Wagner fever had resulted in a general neglect of national composers, even Hector Berlioz and Jules Massenet. He felt that *Wagnerisme* was responsible for the waning prestige of French music, and harshly criticized the musical community for “their infatuation with a music that is totally alien to French taste and tradition.”¹⁴⁸ For Saint-Saëns Wagner’s musical style stood in stark opposition to the “lucidity and transparency” that had defined French music for centuries.¹⁴⁹

Despite the fervent nationalistic aims of both the government and the musical establishment, a city the size and caliber of Paris would not be deprived of Wagner: audiences wanted him, and that ultimately carried more weight than the anti-Wagnerian outcry. Indeed, given the opera public’s penchant for scandal, it is likely that the controversy his music inspired only expanded his already passionate following. As a result, despite nationalist critiques, the French opera-going public continued to have easy access to Wagner’s operas on stages throughout Paris; between 1890 and 1902, the Opéra alone hosted a staggering 535 Wagner performances.¹⁵⁰ French writer and literary critic

¹⁴⁷Léon Vallas, *Vincent d’Indy*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1946), 241, translated in Huebner 200.

¹⁴⁸Schmid, “*À bas Wagner!*: The French Press Campaign against Wagner,” 79.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰Jann Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power: Forces Behind the Reception of Debussy’s Opera,” *19th Century Music* 3 (Spring 1987): 260. It is important to note that this statistic is not for a single Wagner opera. The Opéra

Edmond de Goncourt, appalled that the Opéra staged Wagner four times a week in 1895, commented that, meanwhile “there are sixty-five operas that await performances and will perhaps never be put on!”¹⁵¹

Complaints like Goncourt’s are common and further demonstrate that Wagner was arguably the most formidable musical presence in Paris during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even one of Paris’s most original contemporary composers had to address his influence.

Debussy and *Pelléas et Mélisande*: The Answer to Wagnerisme?

In his first and only opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy confronted the Wagnerian model directly and sought to offer a distinctly French alternative. In 1901, the year before his opera premiered, the composer began publishing polemical articles, in which he decried the threat of Wagner’s oppressive influence, while positioning himself as the savior of French music.¹⁵² Just weeks before *Pelléas* premiered, on 30 April 1902, Debussy wrote “Pourquoi j’ai écrit *Pelléas*”—an article in which he publicly distanced himself from Wagner and emphasized the need for a new path for opera composers in the twentieth century. He stated:

After a few years of pilgrimages to Bayreuth I began to doubt the Wagnerian formula; or rather, it seemed to me that it could only serve Wagner’s particular genius. Without denying his genius, one can say that he has set the end point for the music of his

presented several different Wagner operas during this time period, including *Lohengrin*, *Die Walküre*, *Parsifal*, *Siegfried*, and *Tristan und Isolde*.

¹⁵¹Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power,” 260-1.

¹⁵²Barbara L. Kelly, “Debussy and the Making of a *musician français*,” 59.

time. We must therefore find what is *after* Wagner and not of Wagner.¹⁵³

The way that Debussy describes the story of *Pelléas*—praising its “humanity, evocative language, and sensitivity”—conveys a veiled contempt for Wagner’s grandiose poetry and larger than life plots. In the quotation that follows, Debussy also takes aim at Wagner’s opulent musical language and artificial, heightened vocal writing. He argues that his approach in *Pelléas* is fundamentally different, stating:

I tried to obey a law of beauty that transcends the requirements dramatic music. The characters in this drama are trying to sing like real people, and not in an arbitrary language of traditions that are obsolete...I do not pretend to have it all figured out in *Pelléas*, but I have tried to clear a path for others to follow; my broadening personal discoveries may help rid dramatic music of the heavy constraints, in which it has lived for so long.

Debussy and his followers were convinced that he had achieved his goal of finding a new path for opera. In *Pelléas*, he elevated the importance of the text and its declamation, not wanting to “imitate the follies of the lyric theatre where music insolently predominates and where poetry is relegated to second place.”¹⁵⁴ It was his opinion that “in the opera house they sing *too much*. One should *sing* only when it is worthwhile and hold moving lyrical expression in reserve.”¹⁵⁵ These guiding principles resulted in a work

¹⁵³Claude Debussy, “Pourquoi j’ai écrit *Pelléas*,” (April 1902) in *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure, rev. ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 64.

¹⁵⁴These are Debussy’s words from a conversation with Ernest Guiraud in October 1889, recorded by Maurice Emmanuel and are translated in Robert Orledge, *Debussy and the Theatre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 49.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

that was, as American critic Lawrence Gilman declared in 1907, “not simply a new manner of writing, but a new kind of music.”¹⁵⁶ He described in detail what he found groundbreaking about the opera:

Harmonically it obeys no law—consonances and dissonances are interfused, blended, re-echoed, juxtaposed, without the smallest regard for the rules of tonal relationship established by long tradition...the same tonality is seldom maintained beyond a single beat of the measure... His melodic schemes suggest no known model.¹⁵⁷

Debussy’s innovations attracted many ardent supporters, but inspired an equally strong coalition of harsh critics. The controversy surrounding the work resulted in an onslaught of media coverage, with reviews appearing in all major newspapers and other periodicals of the day.¹⁵⁸

Camille Bellaigue, critic for *Revue des deux mondes*, declared that *Pelléas* represented a “decomposition of our [i.e. French] art,” and argued that Debussy’s understated orchestra and subtle musical language were entirely devoid of “vitality.”¹⁵⁹ Henri de Curzon criticized the work’s overt impressionism and found it to be

¹⁵⁶Lawrence Gilman, *Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande: a Guide to the Opera* (New York: G. Schirmer: 1907), 5.

¹⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 9-10, it is unclear whether or not Gilman saw these radical departures from the mainstream as a good thing. Given that his assessment of the opera as a whole was quite positive, we can speculate that his statement is praise for Debussy’s originality.

¹⁵⁸Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power,” 243.

¹⁵⁹Camille Bellaigue, “*Pelléas et Mélisande*,” *Revue des deux mondes*, 15 May 1902, trans. in Léon Vallas, *Claude Debussy: His Life and Works*, trans. Marie and Grace O’Brien (New York, 1973), 128.

“disappointing, sickly and practically lifeless.”¹⁶⁰ Saint-Saëns, one of the most vocal opponents of the work, claimed that he had passed up his usual summer vacation to stay in Paris and “say nasty things about *Pelléas*.”¹⁶¹

French critic and scholar Louis Laloy emerged as one of Debussy’s greatest champions the year *Pelléas* premiered. In an article published in October 1902, he praised the opera’s declamation as distinctly French, and argued that the work represented a long-awaited and desperately needed alternative to French Wagnerism. Specifically, he wrote that “*Pelléas* is related to the Wagnerian dramas, but with such profound differences that really an entirely new style of symphonic drama has been born.”¹⁶² Laloy’s sentiment was echoed by critic Henri Bauër, who exclaimed in a letter of 8 May 1902: “Finally someone who will liberate French music from Wagnerian oppression!”¹⁶³

Similarly, Pierre Lalo, writing for *Le Temps*, felt that *Pelléas* would help young composers “emancipate themselves from the tyranny of the Wagnerian formula and to conceive and create with more freedom.” He argued that Debussy’s opera was furthering the “cause of France in the world.”¹⁶⁴

As these reviews suggest, *Pelléas* became a *cause célèbre* for the nationalists. However, in order to glorify the work as a model of “Frenchness” in music, these critics

¹⁶⁰Roger Nicholas and Richard Langham Smith, *Claude Debussy: Pelléas et Mélisande* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 147-8. The quote is from an unidentified source, reproduced in *L’Echo musical* (November 1919), 52.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁶²Louis Laloy, “Musique modern, MM Claude Debussy et Paul Dukas,” *Revue d’histoire et de critique* 10 (October 1902), 406, trans. in Kelly, 61.

¹⁶³*Claude Debussy: Lettres 1864-1981*, ed. Francois Lesure (Paris: Hermann, 1980), 114.

¹⁶⁴Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power,” 261.

conveniently ignored the opera's Wagnerian elements, such as the use of leitmotifs, a continuous form, and an orchestra that equaled and at times surpassed the importance of the voice.¹⁶⁵ These links to Wagner, while potentially damaging to Debussy's nationalist credentials, did not diminish the general perception of *Pelléas* as a truly original work.

With *Pelléas*, Debussy had rejuvenated French opera and offered a musical language that was hailed by many of his colleagues and critics as the new national style of France. Debussy's work, much like Wagner's, engaged in a much broader discussion about the complex cultural and political values being debated in turn-of-the-century Paris. The fact that Debussy himself contributed to the debate demonstrates that he understood its importance to the future of *Pelléas*. Opera-goers delighted in controversy and scandal, proving the age-old adage that "any publicity is good publicity." As Pasler concludes in her probing study of *Pelléas*'s early reception, this "massive attention from the press...eventually succeeded in elevating Debussy to the status of a new god of music."¹⁶⁶

Fauré's *Pénélope* and the French Music Press in the Era of Nationalism

There is no doubt that both Wagner and Debussy had a powerful influence on the Parisian music press, shaping how critics would judge *Pénélope*. Particularly notable is the fact that the opera's 1913 premiere coincided with the Wagner centennial; Paris was inundated with performances of Wagner's operas. His strong presence in the Parisian press also reasserted itself: the centennial naturally reignited discussions about Wagner's

¹⁶⁵For a detailed discussion of Wagner's influence on Debussy's *Pelléas* see Steven Huener, "Epilogue by Way of *Pelléas et Mélisande*," in *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle* and Carolyn Abbate, "'Tristan' in the Composition of 'Pelléas,'" *19th-Century Music* 2 (Autumn 1981): 117-141.

¹⁶⁶Pasler, "*Pelléas* and Power," 263.

impact on French opera and invited comparisons between new works and those by the German master.

This was certainly the case for *Pénélope*, whose quality and style would often be assessed within a Wagnerian frame of reference. For instance, critic Gaston Carraud, writing for *La Liberté* on 12 May 1913, argued that *Pénélope* was the best example of its genre since Wagner.¹⁶⁷ A review of the Paris premiere for *L'Action française* placed Fauré's opera "somewhere between the extremes of Monteverdi and Wagner" in its combination of dramatic intensity and classic simplicity.¹⁶⁸ In one of the rare negative reviews of *Pénélope*, critic Jacques Rivière argued that after Wagner, few were up to the task of composing an opera, and Fauré unfortunately was not among them. The critic proceeded to portray Fauré as simply another Wagner imitator who fell "victim to the lyric drama."¹⁶⁹

It is interesting to note that these reviews lack the virulent anti-Wagnerian tone that colored much of music criticism at the end of the nineteenth century. Even Rivière's negative assessment is more critical of what he views as Fauré's lack of originality than the fact that it is Wagner being imitated. Although Wagner remained a dominant and often overbearing presence on the Parisian operatic stage, the shift in rhetoric suggests that the city's musical community was becoming more accepting of his influence. As we will soon see, despite *Pénélope*'s overt adoption of Wagnerian elements such as leitmotifs, endless melody, and the use of the orchestra to propel the drama, the opera

¹⁶⁷Gaston Carraud, "Pénélope," *La Liberté*, 12 May 1913, 2, in Phillips 323.

¹⁶⁸Jean Darnaudat, "Les premières—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope* par Gabriel Fauré," *L'Action française*, 10 May 1913, in Phillips 324.

¹⁶⁹Jacques Rivière, "La *Pénélope* de Gabriel Fauré," *La Nouvelle revue française* 9 (January-June 1913): 1038, in Phillips, 335.

was hailed as an outstanding exemplar of French culture. It was this gentler, more welcoming attitude toward Wagner in 1913 that made this judgment possible.

Saint-Saëns was an obvious exception to this more conciliatory trend, since his stance toward Wagner became harsher throughout the early years of the twentieth century. It is also important to note that the anti-Wagnerian sentiments were reignited with the inception of World War I in 1914. Thus, the 1913 celebration of Wagner on the Parisian stages and in the Parisian press came during a rare lull in the campaign against his works. At this time, he was seen primarily as an important part of music history; the fact that he was no longer current meant that he was no longer quite so threatening.

Not surprisingly, reviews of *Pénélope* also engage with Debussy's influence. He cast a shadow large enough to ensure that any new French opera after 1902 would be subject to comparisons with *Pelléas*. Critic Jean Marnold, writing for *Le Mercure de France* on 16 June 1913, felt that those accustomed to Debussy might find Fauré's style in *Pénélope* "old-fashioned." Similarly, critic Louis Schneider referred to Fauré as the "père harmonique" of Debussy, suggesting that Debussy's musical language was an outgrowth of Fauré's.¹⁷⁰ While this argument admits that Fauré had played a role in Debussy's development, it also positions Fauré's approach as outdated. To the contrary, Paul Souday, writing for *L'Éclair*, placed *Pénélope* alongside D'Indy's *Fervaal*, Dukas' *Ariane et Barbe Bleue*, and *Pelléas et Melisande* as an equally modern and admirable example of contemporary French opera.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰Jean Marnold, *Le mercure de France*, 16 June 1913, 849; Louis Schneider, *Le Gaulois*, 10 May 1913, 3.

¹⁷¹Paul Souday, "Les premières—Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *L'Éclair*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 337.

While the comments above demonstrate that Wagner and Debussy played a role in the critical reception of *Pénélope*, nationalist sentiment remained the most important factor for reviewers when situating the work within the greater French operatic tradition. One major reason for this is that Fauré's image had been essentially coopted by the state to further the cause of French nationalism.

Following the Franco-Prussian War, the government of the Third Republic selected certain cultural figures to serve as representatives of France in the public opinion of its citizens; artists, writers, and composers were among those chosen as national icons. Fauré, Gounod, and Saint-Saëns were the three composers designated by the state as exemplars of France's musical identity. Barbara Kelly explains that the government selected these composers because they were "uncontroversial figures in that they were undoubtedly part of the musical establishment and their creative output was regarded as upholding French traditions."¹⁷²

Interestingly, although Fauré never publicly rejected his role as a nationalist icon, privately he showed no sympathy for the nationalist movement. In a letter to Paul Poujaud from 3 September 1885, Fauré addressed the issue of nationalism in relationship to an operatic project (a setting of *Mazeppa*) he was then considering:

I shall not be setting out to make *Mazeppa* an essentially French work... I cannot accept such distinctions as far as this art called music is concerned, the prime quality of which is that it is a universal language or rather the language of a country so far above all others that it demeans itself when it expresses feelings

¹⁷²Barbara L. Kelly, "Introduction," 5.

or characteristics belonging to one or another nation in particular.¹⁷³

Despite Fauré's personal rejection of nationalist ideology, the following reviews demonstrate that in 1913 one of the agendas of the critical community was to glorify works that upheld the nation's cultural values. For example, Alfred Bruneau (*Le Matin*) exclaimed that *Pénélope* "ranks with those works that best honor the French school."¹⁷⁴ His colleague at *La Petite République* offered a similar assessment, calling the opera "une oeuvre qui honore...l'école française."¹⁷⁵ By closely aligning Fauré's opera with the French school, these reviewers implied that it was a deliberate continuation of efforts by composers like Gounod, Saint-Saëns, and Massenet to further the cause of nationalism in music, thus positioning *Pénélope* as part of that cause, regardless of its composer's intent.

Several reviews represented *Pénélope*'s "essentially French" character¹⁷⁶ in more sweeping terms. After witnessing the opera's premiere, one particularly enthusiastic critic found that "for the first time in 150 years, the French stage has spoken its own language."¹⁷⁷ Auguste Germain (*L'Echo de Paris*) wrote that *Pénélope* "affirmed once again the glory of French music," while Adolphe Jullian (*Le Journal des débats*) called it

¹⁷³Nectoux: *Fauré: His Life through His Letters*, 123-4.

¹⁷⁴Alfred Bruneau, "Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, l'altière et pure beauté de *Pénélope* provoque un immense enthousiasme," *Le Matin*, 10 May 1913, 5.

¹⁷⁵Paul Abram, "Le Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*," *La Petite republic* 11 May 1913. English translation: "A work that honors the French school."

¹⁷⁶Anon, "*Pénélope*: M. Gabriel Fauré's Music," *Daily Mail*, 11 May 1913, in Phillips, 319.

¹⁷⁷J. Saint-Jean, "Revue musicale—Théâtre des Champs Élysées: *Pénélope*," *La Nouvelle revue* 15 June 1913, 514, in Phillips, 335.

“the true perfume of France.”¹⁷⁸ Pierre Lalo’s superlative review for *Le Temps* hailed *Pénélope* as “the most perfectly French work we have seen appear for a long time, French by its feeling and its expression, born out of the traditions of Rameau and Racine, a work entirely of our own traditions, and the best, the purest of them.”¹⁷⁹

Compared to the reviews of *Pelléas*, critics were clearly much more united in their praise of *Pénélope*’s national character. While Jullian and Lalo praised both *Pelléas* and *Pénélope* for reinvigorating French opera, Camille Bellaigue, as we have seen, condemned Debussy’s work as the “decomposition of our [French] art.”¹⁸⁰ Several reviews sympathized with Bellaigue’s view, including those written by Louis de Fourcaud, Arthur Pougin, Alfred Bruneau, and Henri de Curzon. Yet, these same five critics were united in the belief that *Pénélope* was French opera at its finest.

Perhaps the fact that Fauré’s opera was more conservative and less controversial than Debussy’s explains why it was glorified as the new model of nationalism in music. At the time it premiered, *Pénélope* simply had broader appeal among members of the music press. However, the critics’ emphatic endorsement of Fauré’s opera as a French masterpiece did not help to cement its place in the regular repertoire following its premiere. It appears that, while the Wagnerian debates provided a unique opportunity for the promotion of *Pelléas*, by the time *Pénélope* premiered, the tensions had cooled. Fauré’s opera was still a source of pride in an era continually preoccupied with national

¹⁷⁸Adolphe Jullien, “*Pénélope*,” *Le Journal des débats*, 10 May 1913, 2.

¹⁷⁹Pierre Lalo, “Le Théâtre lyrique de Gabriel Fauré,” *Le Temps* 15 April 1913, trans. in Carlo Cabarelo “Patriotism or Nationalism? Fauré and the Great War,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 3 (Autumn 1999), 599.

¹⁸⁰Pasler, “*Pelléas* and Power,” 252.

identity, but it was not a target of the press frenzy that made Debussy's work a banner on a much larger battlefield.

Chapter 4: *Pénélope*'s 1913 Premieres

Pénélope in Monte Carlo

From everything we know, *Pénélope*'s premiere in Monte Carlo was less successful than Fauré had hoped. It seems that much of the blame falls on the director of the Opéra de Monte Carlo, Raoul Gunsbourg. During the preparations for *Pénélope*, Gunsbourg was noticeably preoccupied with the launch of his own three-act opera, *Venise*, scheduled to premiere just four days after Fauré's. According to Nectoux, *Pénélope* suffered as a result. He explains that "the production itself had been too hasty to produce satisfactory results in any of the (merely) three performances which had been planned--for 4, 11 and 15 March 1913."¹⁸¹

On 5 March 1913, Saint-Saëns mentioned the situation in Monte Carlo to his editor, Jacques Durand: "Gunsbourg is behaving appallingly, he's doing everything he can to push *Venise* at *Pénélope*'s expense...He told Mme Litvinne [the singer Felia Litvinne] that his was the only real music, and before it all other music would vanish."¹⁸² Two days later, Saint-Saëns wrote to Fauré: "From what you tell me I can see that Gunsbourg has been devoting all his attention to *Venise*, but what matters is the musical execution, and that must inevitably be good. I shall judge on Tuesday and tell you what I think."¹⁸³

¹⁸¹Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 326.

¹⁸²Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré, *Correspondance*, (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 1973), 98, translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 327.

¹⁸³Nectoux, *Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, 287.

A week before the premiere Fauré elaborated on the difficult circumstances in Monte Carlo in a letter to his wife:

I have, whatever else, two good interpreters in Mlle Bréval and Rousselière [as Pénélope and Ulysse], and in some of the smaller roles. Even so, I'm not expecting anything approaching perfection. As far as Gunsbourg is concerned, I have the feeling my work is totally misunderstood. He keeps saying "It's classical opera, it's a classical opera" in a ways which suggests deep contempt!... His most recent idea was to alter the end of *Pénélope* and replace the final calm with a lot of noise and uproar. You may rest assured I shall allow nothing of the sort.¹⁸⁴

Ultimately, Fauré lost the battle over the opera's finale; he wrote a large, powerful chorus to replace the original ending that Gunsbourg found far too subdued.

The rushed preparations and Gunsbourg's blasé attitude were only part of the problem, however. It appears that the theater's acoustic was yet another disappointment. Saint-Saëns addressed the sound quality in a letter to Fauré after attending the second of the three Monte-Carlo performances:

It was a beautiful performance, with the singers in fine voice, but is it their fault or that of the auditorium? One cannot hear the words, whereas in a work like this one does not want to miss a single one. The brass makes too much noise, but there it is the auditorium that is to blame, it's nothing for you to worry about; anywhere else the effect would be quite different.¹⁸⁵

Additionally, Lucienne Bréval became ill shortly before the first performance.

Until the day before the premiere, it remained unclear if she would be able to perform.

¹⁸⁴Philippe Fauré-Frémiet, ed, *Gabriel Fauré: Lettres intimes* (Paris: La Colombe, 1951), 216, translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 326.

¹⁸⁵Nectoux, *Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, 288.

Luckily, by the opening night she felt well enough to get through the three performances, but it appears that her voice was less arresting than usual. Following the March 11 performance, the music critic for *Le Journal de Monaco* offered this rather lukewarm assessment: “[Bréval] made praiseworthy efforts to give a moving performance of the role of Pénélope.”¹⁸⁶ Nectoux speculates that she offered a “static interpretation, more majestic than passionate,”¹⁸⁷ but there is little direct support for this in the reviews. In fact, critiques of the Monte-Carlo production contain no hint of the difficulties *Pénélope* faced behind the scenes.

Fauré’s former student, Nadia Boulanger, wrote a rave review for *Le Ménestrel*, concluding that “the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo gave a splendidly executed performance of *Pénélope*, with interpreters, an orchestra and scenery that were absolutely perfect.”¹⁸⁸ The orchestra was led by Belgian conductor, Léon Jehin, with the “neo-Grecian, pre-Hollywood”¹⁸⁹ scenery designed by Alphonse Visconti. In the following passage Louis de Fourcaud (*Le Gaulois*) describes the production in detail:

There has been talk for a long time about the premiere of the *drame musicale* by M. Gabriel Fauré, the illustrious musician whose dramatic voice has never been heard before now. We have heard. Our impatience was justified because the work is beautiful and personal... The hero Ulysses was interpreted by M. Rousselière, the valiant, intelligent tenor with a strong, sweet voice. He was truly remarkable in his creation of the beggar king. The orchestra, under Léon Jehin, was almost without peer.

¹⁸⁶Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 327.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸Nadia Boulanger, *Le Ménestrel*, 15 March 1913, 82.

¹⁸⁹Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 327.

The scenery is accurate and has a brilliant character, and the staging is proper for the story.¹⁹⁰

Henri Quittard describes the public's reaction to the premiere as generally positive and praises its first-rate execution:

Although public favor is too often prompted by works that it is impossible to compare to this one, *Pénélope's* success was considerable. The obvious superiority of the score commanded our attention from the first sound. It is only fair to say that the indefatigable zeal of M. Raoul Gunsbourg spared nothing in order to brilliantly execute a work that honors the Monte-Carlo theatre.¹⁹¹

August Germain also notes the audience's positive reaction to the opera. Like his colleagues cited above, he praises all aspects of the production:

Everything that we expected of M. Gabriel Fauré, who for the first time approached the stage, was fulfilled yesterday. The work as a whole has raised enthusiasm...it is a triumph that rededicates the illustrious name of Gabriel Fauré. Lucienne Bréval's *Pénélope* was a stunning creation. She expressed, with a skillful and refined art, all the nuances of the role, knowing when to bring out certain details and combining melancholy and sadness with a profound tenderness that culminates in a splendid explosion of bliss. [Rousselière's voice] was once again a marvel for its softness, the caress of its inflections, and also the magnificent heat and élan in the finale where the warrior routs his enemies. Like always, the orchestra, under the direction of Léon Jehin, was impeccable and the chorus was outstanding. It should also be noted that the scenery by M. Visconti, especially

¹⁹⁰Louis de Fourcaud, *Le Gaulois*, 5 March 1913, 3.

¹⁹¹Henri Quittard, *Le Figaro*, 6 March 1913, 6.

in the second act, creates a moonlight effect of the most radiant beauty. But what must be praised above all, is the constant effort of M. Raoul Gunsbourg, who seeks to provide us with magnificent spectacles of art and beauty.¹⁹²

It is interesting to note that both Quittard and Germaine cite Gunsbourg as the mastermind behind the production's success. By 1913, Gunsbourg had established the Opéra de Monte Carlo as a world-class venue and solidified his reputation as one of the most important impresarios of the early twentieth century. He premiered several important works, including Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (1893), Saint-Saëns' *Hélène* (1904), Mascagni's *Amica* (1905), and Massenet's *Don Quichotte* (1910). The venue played host to the most famous performers of the day, including Sarah Bernhardt, Nellie Melba, Enrico Caruso, and Feodor Chaliapin. Given Gunsbourg's impressive record, it is not surprising that the critics gave him credit for what they perceived to be a successful production of *Pénélope*.

Without the help of Fauré's correspondence, one might justifiably assume that the production went off without a hitch. Indeed, it remains somewhat puzzling that Fauré was disappointed with the results in Monte-Carlo, given that the critical reception was predominately favorable. However, the composer knew better than anyone what the score was supposed to sound like, and he was not pleased with everything he heard. While this certainly troubled Fauré, he viewed *Pénélope*'s premiere in Monte-Carlo as merely a trial run before the opera debuted in Paris.

¹⁹²August Germaine, *L'Écho de Paris*, 5 March 1913, 2.

Pénélope Finds an Unexpected Venue in Paris

Because of the difficulties Fauré faced in Monte Carlo, he was even more concerned with the success of the Paris premiere. During the preparations in Monte Carlo, Fauré wrote to his wife: “I just hope things will have settled down by the time the opera reaches Paris. Here I get the impression what I’ve composed is boring, grey and lifeless.”¹⁹³ Unlike Monte Carlo, where the composer was merely an occasional visitor, Paris had been anticipating the launch of a Fauré opera for years. His very public role as head of the Conservatoire meant that his compositional activities were at the forefront of the city’s cultural consciousness. *Pénélope* was awaited with more enthusiasm than any of the Fauré’s other projects; for the first time, critics and audiences would watch the master tackle Paris’s most beloved and important art form.

Despite the excitement surrounding *Pénélope*’s Paris debut, Fauré had difficulty securing a venue: the premiere was initially going to take place at the Opéra-Comique under the direction of Albert Carré, but it was then moved to the Opéra where André Messager was director. As we know, the premiere ultimately took place at neither of these main houses; instead *Pénélope* debuted at Gabriel Astruc’s Théâtre des Champs-Élysées as part of its inaugural season. This was a significant turn of events for the opera.

The older, more established houses would have been an obvious choice for Fauré’s work; he was, by now, a fixture in the Parisian musical establishment, and was lauded by the French government as a symbol of national culture. As we have learned in chapter three, both the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique relied heavily on the state for

¹⁹³Philippe Fauré-Fremiet, ed, *Gabriel Fauré: Lettres intimes* (Paris: La Colombe, 1951), 216, translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 326.

funding. It would seem natural for a national icon's first opera to premiere at one of the theaters where the production of indigenous opera was a non-negotiable mandate.

Critic Adolphe Jullien offers an explanation for the change of venue:

The director of the Opéra de Paris (M. Andre Messenger), a dear friend of M. Fauré's, expressed his desire to offer the premiere to Paris, but after some reflection he found that the music of M. Fauré, always very delicate and finely embroidered, would be better placed elsewhere...and so *Pénélope* came to the new theater built by M. Gabriel Astruc.¹⁹⁴

The importance of this statement cannot be overstated. Messenger had been friends with Fauré since they met in the late 1870s, yet he was the one who barred *Pénélope* from the most prestigious opera house in all of Paris. It seems unlikely that Messenger did this to hinder the opera's success. Instead, he might have intended to protect the work, recognizing that the intimacy of Fauré's music would be lost on such a grand stage. Regardless of the underlying reasons for Messenger's decision, there is no question that the choice of venue impacted *Pénélope*'s reception.

The Théâtre des Champs-Élysées' inaugural season created a stir even before its doors were open to the public. Located in one of the most fashionable areas in Paris, "in the Champs-Élysées, where upper-class luxury and modern mass entertainment met," the theater exhibited a strikingly modern architectural design that was unlike anything the French had ever seen. As Jean-Michel Rabaté remarks in his book *1913: The Cradle of Modernism*, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was "immediately remarkable for its white

¹⁹⁴Adolphe Jullien, *Le Journal des débats*, 10 May 1913, 2. From the available source material, it remains unclear exactly why the premiere did not take place at the Opéra-Comique.

lines, its grandiose simplicity, and the novelty of its design.”¹⁹⁵ Both critics and supporters of the new theater agreed that it was a significant “avant-gardist landmark, a new temple for the arts in Paris.” Rabaté describes the theater’s architecture as a “mixture of audacity and conservatism that is found in most of the landmarks of 1913 modernism.”¹⁹⁶ In combining neo-classicism and modernity, the building could be considered a metaphorical representation of the stylistic traits associated with Fauré’s *Pénélope*. Coincidentally, the theater’s gestation period was almost identical to the opera’s: plans for the building were drawn up in 1907, and the project was finished early in 1913.

With impresario Gabriel Astruc at the helm, the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées became the center of cultural life in 1913 Paris. A major reason for this was that the theater became home to Sergei Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes. Since coming to Paris in 1906 Diaghilev had worked tirelessly to cultivate an audience for Russian art, music, and dance. By 1913, he had secured an ardent and diverse following that had expanded beyond the aristocratic salon audiences who supported his first few Parisian seasons. Lynn Garafola describes the new additions to his audience as “the demimonde, that glamorous half-world of courtesans, actresses, takes, and tabloid journalists,” who found themselves at the Ballets Russes’ performances alongside “the connoisseurs and collectors of high society.”¹⁹⁷

Diaghilev’s increasingly extravagant productions became celebrity events, *the* place to see and be seen for this new elite. Garafola astutely observes that the Ballet

¹⁹⁵Jean-Michel Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 108.

¹⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁹⁷Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 294.

Russes' unparalleled success was the result of its impresario's willingness to "cater to the tastes of his public and transform a genre of limitless possibilities into a commercially exploitable formula."¹⁹⁸ Each year Diaghilev felt more pressure to surpass the previous season's triumphs, and Parisian audiences waited intently to discover what he had in store for them. The year 1913 was no exception, featuring Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, Debussy's *Jeux*, and Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*.

To premiere a work during such an explosive season, at the most talked-about theater in Paris, seems like every composer's dream. In the case of *Pénélope*, however, this circumstance may have hindered the work's long-term success. As Garafola suggests, "the noisy, untutored mob of fashionable and demimonde Paris had largely overshadowed the musically sophisticated community of Diaghilev's early seasons...one of connoisseurs bred in the habits of aristocracy."¹⁹⁹ Yet Fauré's work appealed most readily to this thinning collection of connoisseurs; his was the music for the initiated, the salon public who had embraced him since the 1870s.

As Garafola points out, "where repetition might offer the connoisseur further occasion for contemplation, for the consumer it merely lessens the value of the original."²⁰⁰ Diaghilev created an audience of consumers who were always on to the next, hottest thing. This was not an environment favorable to a work like Fauré's. *Pénélope* demanded rapt attention from the audience; its nuanced musical language and sedate dramatic character were too easily overshadowed by Diaghilev's sensational productions.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 287.

¹⁹⁹Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 298.

²⁰⁰Ibid.

Diaghilev had reshaped the opera audience and redefined their expectations. He reignited the public's passion for extravagance, offering productions that mirrored the lavishness of French Grand Opera at its peak. It is an unfortunate coincidence that Fauré's serene and rather restrained work found itself directly in the path of Paris's Russian obsession. In that context, Fauré might have been perceived as tasteful, refined, and even timeless, but comparatively dull. As we will see, despite the fact that *Pénélope* was praised ardently by critics at the time of its premiere, it was largely ignored by the opera establishment after 1913. There can be little doubt that the placement of the opera's premiere during the Ballets Russes' so-called *Grand saison de Paris* played a role in its fate.

There was, however, one clearly positive aspect of this seemingly inauspicious timing: as part of Astruc's first season at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, *Pénélope*'s Paris premiere was widely publicized. Astruc ensured that the theater was a subject of discussion for every major newspaper in Paris, leading up to its opening night on 30 March 1913.²⁰¹ Although the first articles to appear focus mainly on the building's architecture and the anticipated arrival of the Ballets Russes, *Pénélope* is often mentioned as one of the upcoming attractions at the new venue. Performances of *Pénélope* alternated evenings with those by the Ballets Russes and, as a result, the opera appeared in most listings and articles about the famous ballet company. Ultimately, because of Astruc's well-oiled publicity machine, the opera received much more attention than it might have had if notoriously modest Fauré himself had been driving the marketing efforts.

²⁰¹Rabaté, *1913: The Cradle of Modernism*, 108.

The Paris Production in Review

Fauré took a much more active role in the preparations for the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées premiere of *Pénélope* than he did for the premiere in Monte-Carlo. A letter to Gabriel Astruc from 6 April 1913 gives us a sense of the composer's intense determination to achieve success in Paris. This is about as emphatic as Fauré ever gets:

I am writing now to ask you to arrange a meeting as soon as possible between yourself, Van Dyck, Hasselmans, and myself to talk in specific terms about the rehearsals for and interpretation of *Pénélope*.

There is no need for me to draw your attention to the importance of this opening. This is an *extremely* serious business as far as I am concerned, as I believe it is also for your theatre, is it not? So for your sake and for mine the performance of *Pénélope* must be absolutely first-rate; in other words if Muratore's return--and you faithfully promised me Muratore, whom I *must have*--means a delay, then we must accept that delay... And I must also ask you to give your very serious attention to the very important question of the positioning of the orchestra. Wednesday evening's arrangement (with the orchestra and chorus on stage) was a big success for you.²⁰² Everyone agreed that the acoustics of the auditorium were excellent. But this is not the case with operatic performances. There everyone agrees that the orchestra does not *carry*, and that the strings in particular cannot be heard. You will undoubtedly find a solution, but you will forgive me for insisting that you start looking for that solution as soon as possible. I shall be at your disposal as soon as you like and at whatever time you like, but please let's waste no more time.²⁰³

²⁰²Here Fauré is referring to a performance that took place at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 2 April 1913. *Le Gaulois* listed the event as simply a *Concert de musique française*. This description, with the orchestra on stage, is consistent with Fauré's remark, which likely refers to an instrumental performance, rather than an opera or a ballet.

²⁰³Nectoux, *Fauré: His Life Through His Letters*, 289-90.

The Paris premiere was conducted by Louis Hasslemans with Lucienne Bréval again in the title role and Lucien Muratore as Ulysse. According to Saint-Saëns, Muratore was “infinitely superior to his predecessor,” Charles Rousselière.²⁰⁴ Yet, as we saw in the reviews from Monte Carlo, Rousselière was widely praised by the critics there. This discrepancy points out that at times what is said privately differs from what makes it into print. Indeed, many of Saint-Saëns’ comments on *Pénélope* were quite specific, while the critics seemed to favor sweeping generalizations and flowery praise to describe both the Monte-Carlo and Paris performances.

Visually, the Paris production was meticulously and artfully executed. The sets were designed by Ker-Xavier Roussel, who was a member of *Les Nabis*—a group of painters known for their rejection of impressionism in favor of the more modern, post-impressionistic experiments of Paul Gauguin. Art historian Russel T. Clement points out, however, that “despite artistic affinities with the rest of the group, Roussel developed his own style and pursued an individual expression of serenity and idealism in his works.”²⁰⁵ Roussel was commissioned for other productions at Astruc’s theater, but his aesthetic was particularly well suited to *Pénélope*, with its subtle color palate and general sense of refinement. The costumes were designed by Henri-Gabriel Ibels, an artist peripherally associated with the Nabi group and known for his “bold and expressively graphic”

²⁰⁴Jean Michel Nectoux, “Correspondance Saint-Saëns Fauré: III 1913-1920,” *Revue de musicologie* 1 (1973), 70.

²⁰⁵Russel T. Clement, Annick Houze and Christiane Erbolato-Ramsey, *A Sourcebook of Gauguin’s Symbolist Followers: Les Nabis, Pont-Aven, Rose + Croix: Art Reference Collection Number 27* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004), 568.

style.²⁰⁶ His designs added an element of drama to the production, while reflecting the balance between classicism and modernity that defines *Pénélope*.

Critic Louis Schneider offers a detailed description of the *mises-en-scène* in his review for *Le Gaulois*:

The sets of painter Roussel show us not the Greece of convention, but real landscapes and interiors, studied with the required skill and translated throughout for theatrical optics with real style, lit with the science of flawless effects...The scenes are animated by the costumes of M. Ibels, who himself studied at our museum, the Louvre, in order to dress his characters. The same applies to the dances directed by Mlle Jeanne Charles, who makes you believe that the vases of Attica had materialized and come to life.²⁰⁷

As discussed in chapter 2, despite finding flaws in individual components of the opera, the majority of critics concluded that *Pénélope* was Fauré's crowning achievement, a timeless masterpiece of enduring artistic value. Critic and composer Emile Vuillermoz summarizes the general sentiment about the work following its first Parisian performance:

It can now be admitted that many of Fauré's supporters were nervous to see the *maître*, after his glorious successes in the field of chamber music, making such an attempt to conquer the musical stage. The young Suitors smiled to themselves when they saw ranged against them this rival with his white hair, calmly and confidently taking up the mighty bow of opera. And, as in Homer, they suddenly saw the new Ulysse brandish his weapon, draw it with a vigorous arm and let fly an arrow that

²⁰⁶Ibid., 569.

²⁰⁷Louis Schneider, *Le Gaulois*, 10 May 1913.

pierced the audience to the heart. Paris stands amazed at the feat.²⁰⁸

Arthur Pougin's review for *Le Ménestrel* also gives us a good sense for how the audience reacted. He wrote that *Pénélope* "will remain one of the greatest titles of honor for M. Fauré, who was greeted by the audience with a warmth and an enthusiasm that he had never known."²⁰⁹ Louis Schneider also noted the audience response: "It is amid endless cheers that the curtain falls on each act."²¹⁰ From these words, it is still unclear whether this glowing reception reflected adoration for the composer or genuine excitement for the opera. Likely, it was both. The review in *Le Temps*, the most respected and widely circulated newspaper in Paris, offers a slightly more detailed picture:

The success was, without exaggeration, triumphal. Each act, heard with rapt attention, earned the artists repeated applause; at the end of the work, an enthusiastic and unanimous demonstration occurred in honor of the composer who, in setting the Homeric legend deftly transposed by Mr. Fauchois, has written a score in which the French school can take pride in forever."²¹¹

The review printed in *Le Figaro* was written by a *soiriste*, a journalist specifically charged with chronicling theatre premieres. The detailed article is signed "Un Monsieur de l'Orchestre." Although it is unclear why the author chose to remain anonymous, it might have something to do with the fact that Fauré was one of the music

²⁰⁸Quote taken from a review Emile Vuillermoz wrote for the SIM (Société Indépendent Musicale) on 15 May 1913. Translated in Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 328.

²⁰⁹Arthur Pougin, *Le Ménestrel*, 17 May 1913, 155.

²¹⁰Louis Schneider, *Le Gaulois*, 10 May 1913.

²¹¹Ad. *Pénélope*, *Le Temps*, 11 May 1913, 4.

critics for *Le Figaro* at the time *Pénélope* premiered. As Fauré's employer, *Le Figaro* would have been particularly susceptible to accusations of partiality. To counteract possible objections, the review focuses on the atmosphere in the auditorium during the opening night rather than offering a detailed critique of the score. The author wrote:

It was a sensational ceremony that took place in Paris, after [the production] returned from Monte-Carlo. The great work of master Fauré, with its regal harmonies, was long and eagerly awaited by all those who have learned to hear and pride themselves on their listening skills. In the hall, after having lent the composer's noble musicians an attentive hear, and having emphasized its beauty with frenzied applause whenever it could be done without impropriety, one exchanged favorable impressions and music-lover's enthusiasm in the corridors. Amateurs and professionals, subscribers and critics, were effusive in their outbursts and their acclaim.²¹²

This author also notes the exemplary interpretation of the singers: "Do not forget to celebrate the performance of Mme. Lucienne Bréval and M. Muratore, whose beautiful, stylized portrayals added a further attraction to this regal art, rare and delicate."

In general, the Paris reviews are more detailed in their assessment of the singers. Adolphe Aderer (*Le Petit Parisien*) writes: "Mme. Bréval translated the character of the Queen of Ithica with great pride, melancholy, and noble passion that the role demands; M. Muratore sung the role of Ulysses with the ardor and communicative warmth that he is well known for."²¹³ Louis Lalo (*Le Temps*) concludes his review by noting that "praise must also be awarded to the protagonists, Mme. Lucienne Bréval and M. Muratore, both

²¹²Anon, "La Soirée: *Pénélope* au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," *Le Figaro* (11 May 1913), 4.

²¹³Adolphe Aderer, *Le Petit Parisien*, 11 May 1913, 2.

magnificent talents who were always at the service of the work they presented.” He goes on to praise the production as a whole: “The theatre administration will be justly proud of the new effort that gives the greatest honor to all those who contributed to its ultimate success.”²¹⁴

Pénélope’s Path to Obscurity

Thus, as we have seen, the critics who covered *Pénélope*’s Paris premiere describe the audience as genuinely impressed and charmed by Fauré’s work. The response seems to go far beyond a mere show of respect for an aging, venerated musical icon. Nearly every available review suggests that Fauré had created a masterpiece, a work that would stand the test of time to become one of France’s most respected cultural treasures. Not only did this fail to occur, but the opera lost the public’s attention just weeks after its premiere.

Oddly enough, part of the problem might have been the fact that the critics were so unanimous in their praise of *Pénélope*. On the surface, this seems like an ideal environment for any new work. However, the fact that all of the critics agreed meant that no arguments or controversies arose in relation to the production. Recall from chapter three that it was the sharply divided critical opinion that kept Debussy’s *Pelléas* in the press for years. Since no critics took each other to task over their opinions of *Pénélope*, there was no need to say anything more beyond the initial reviews, either to defend one’s stance or to criticize another’s. In short, Fauré wrote a perfectly uncontroversial work at a time when the musical press thrived on controversy and scandal.

²¹⁴Pierre Lalo, *Le Temps*, 11 May 1913, 3.

To make matters worse, just three weeks after *Pénélope*'s premiere another new work emerged on Astruc's playbill, generating enough controversy to keep the press salivating for months. This was Stravinsky's infamous *Le Sacre du printemps*. Produced by Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes, *Le Sacre* premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 29 May 1913. In his detailed account of the opening night, Thomas Forest Kelly argues that the premiere may have been "the most important single moment in the history of twentieth-century music... It certainly was one of the loudest unamplified moments."²¹⁵

Audiences were so shocked by Stravinsky's ballet that they rioted at the premiere. Parisian artist Valentine Gross who was in the theater at the time, described the scene quite vividly: "The theatre seemed to be shaken by an earthquake. It seemed to shudder. People shouted insults, howled and whistled... There was slapping and even punching. Words are inadequate to describe such a scene."²¹⁶ Stravinsky recalled that Diaghilev's only comment about the uproar was: "Exactly what I wanted."²¹⁷ The composer suspected that "[Diaghilev] had already thought about the possibility of such a scandal when I first played him the score."²¹⁸

Following the scandal, responses to *Le Sacre* dominated the Parisian press. As Jessica Duchen points out, "there is barely a mention of the gentle and dignified opera

²¹⁵Thomas Forest Kelly, *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 258.

²¹⁶Peter Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30.

²¹⁷Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (London, 1979), 46.

²¹⁸*Ibid.*

that was being performed in the same theatre.”²¹⁹ As if this was not enough of a blow to Fauré’s beloved *Pénélope*, Gabriel Astruc found himself facing bankruptcy just five months after his theater opened. Diaghilev’s lavish productions cost more to launch than the theater was able to earn back in ticket sales. Astruc attempted to organize another season starting in October of 1913, but this was a painfully short-lived venture. *Pénélope* was revived at the theater as part of that new season, but the performances were of poor quality, as is evident from Fauré’s letter to Fauchois from 27 October 1913: “I don’t know whether it is the memory of those very mediocre recent evenings of *Pénélope*, but I am wallowing in the blackest depression!”²²⁰ In the end, the sets and costumes for *Pénélope* had to be sold off, meaning that it would be some time before a revival of the opera could occur. Fauré lamented: “And so my poor *Pénélope* lies down for a long sleep.”²²¹

Pénélope Beyond 1913

The positive reception of *Pénélope*’s two premieres gave every indication that the opera would quickly establish a place in the regular repertory. After all, out of the eighteen known reviews of the Monte-Carlo premiere, only three were negative.²²² The ratio was equally impressive in Paris: among the 48 known reviews only two were

²¹⁹Jessica Duchon, *Gabriel Fauré* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 177.

²²⁰Nectoux, *Fauré: His Life through His Letters*, 292.

²²¹Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 328.

²²²In Monte-Carlo the negative reviews were written by Jean Chantavoine (*Excelsior*) who found Fauré’s music too delicate for the stage (see chapter 1, page 6); Arthur Neisser who panned the opera in both the *Signale für die musikalische Welt* and the *Neue zeitschrift für Musik* (see chapter 2, page 8); and Jacques Rivière for *La Nouvelle revue français* (see chapter 3, page 12).

predominantly unfavorable.²²³ However, circumstances once again conspired against Fauré. World War I broke out in August of 1914, just months after Gabriel Astruc's theater went bankrupt. As a result *Pénélope* laid dormant until 20 January 1919, when it was revived at the Opéra-Comique for a brief run.²²⁴ The opera resurfaced at this venue sporadically through 1931, but never for more than a few performances at a time.²²⁵

It was not until 1943, when Europe was in the throes of World War II, that *Pénélope* finally had its debut at the Paris Opéra. Unfortunately, its run at that most prominent Parisian venue was short-lived, and it did not reappear there after 1949.²²⁶ Altogether, since *Pénélope* premiered on 4 March 1913, it has been performed roughly 200 times—a very modest number compared to the best known operas by Handel, Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini, which have each seen performances in the thousands.²²⁷ There are only two existing recordings of the opera: a live performance from 1956 conducted by Désiré-Émile Inghelbrecht, and a studio recording from 1982 conducted by Charles Dutoit with Jessye Norman in the title role. While detailed examination of *Pénélope*'s performance history after 1913 is beyond the scope of this

²²³Jean Marnold writing for *Le Mercure de France* called the work old-fashioned (see chapter 2, page 22-3). Also see G. Linor, "Au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées: *Pénélope*, L'interprétation," *Comoedia*, 10 May 1913, 2. According to Edward R. Phillips (page 331), Linor found faults with the performance, but was rather mild in his criticisms.

²²⁴The available Opéra-Comique archives do not list the number of performances for their *Pénélope* revivals. Neither do any of the secondary sources—e.g. Nectoux simply states that the 1919 revival included only a few performances. This is consistent with the information I found in David Charlton and Nicole Wild, *Théâtre de l'Opéra Comique Paris: Répertoire 1762-1972* (Belgium: Pierre Margada, 2005).

²²⁵Charlton and Wild, 359.

²²⁶Nectoux, *Fauré: A Musical Life*, 328.

²²⁷Muriel Denzler and Mike Gibb, "Operabase: The World's Most Performed Operas," operabase.com (accessed 23 January 2012).

thesis, suffice it to say that *Pénélope* has been glaringly underrepresented in the repertory in the years since Fauré's death.

Conclusion

Fauré, as both a composer and public figure, defies rigid classification. His various professional roles reveal a man deeply entrenched in the Parisian musical establishment, yet his personal ideology kept him from aligning himself with any specific stylistic movements or political doctrines. He was simultaneously a conservative and a modernist. He helped to revive the music of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Classical eras as the head of the Conservatoire while remaining devoted to new music through his presidency of the Société musicale indépendante. He was a nationalist icon, whose view of music as a universal language was directly at odds with the ideology that venerated his “Frenchness.”

When examining French opera at the turn of the century, we certainly see Fauré engaging with some of the era’s prevailing artistic trends. His adoption of an ancient Greek subject links *Pénélope* with Diaghilev’s Hellenistic ballets, and the contemporary revivals of operas by Rameau, Lully, and Gluck, that were inspired by Greek mythology. His focus on the human element in Homer’s epic reflects the guiding principles of the realist movement, while the opera’s musical style draws inspiration from both Wagner and Debussy, who each had a profound impact on the future of French opera. When taken as a whole, however, the critics writing in 1913 judged *Pénélope* to be a decidedly independent work. Indeed, Fauré used existing operatic formulas and techniques, but he manipulated them in an original way, using a harmonic language that was decidedly *Fauréan*.

Although Fauré’s perceived artistic independence earned *Pénélope* praise for its profound sincerity and uncompromising integrity, these latter qualities have also been

used to explain the opera's demise. Many Fauré scholars have lauded the composer for refusing to pander to the demands of the operatic public, and not resorting to the "cheap tricks" that have made lesser composers popular with the masses. This view implies that *Pénélope* is simply too sophisticated and nuanced for the typical opera-goer. Nectoux appears to adopt this stance, finding that "whenever *Pénélope* is put on, critics and musicians are enthusiastic about it, but the opera public is disconcerted by a style that makes no concessions and by its uniformity of tone."²²⁸ Koechlin similarly suggested that *Pénélope*'s genius would be lost on an audience accustomed to the extrovert drama of works like Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904).²²⁹

Although there is some truth in these arguments, the opera's failure cannot be easily explained away as a product of its reserved dramatic character. This aspect of *Pénélope* generated some criticism in 1913, but it also inspired comparisons with Debussy's *Pelléas* and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*—two works that have found a place in the repertory despite shunning outward spectacle in favor of psychological drama. Scholars thus point to the unfortunate timing of *Pénélope*'s premiere to explain why works like *Pelléas* and *Tristan* have survived while *Pénélope* has not.

Indeed, given *Pénélope*'s predominantly favorable reception by the press, poor timing seems to be the best explanation for the opera's virtual disappearance. However, close examination of the 1913 reviews has revealed a more complex picture. We have seen, for instance, that when assessing *Pénélope* the critics were often more specific in their criticisms than in their praise. Sweeping generalizations and vague, flowery language were used often when describing the opera's merits, while more detailed

²²⁸Nectoux, *Fauré: a Musical Life*, 328-9.

²²⁹Koechlin, *Gabriel Fauré 1845-1924*, 60.

critiques were reserved for its perceived weaknesses: the libretto, orchestration, and dramatic character. Although many critics concluded their reviews by declaring *Pénélope* to be Fauré's masterpiece, they never fully articulated what, precisely, earned the opera this superlative praise.

The reviews seem to betray a deep-seeded bias on the part of the French musical press. Throughout the course of his career, Fauré touched the lives of nearly everyone who reviewed works for major Parisian newspapers and periodicals. The critics who covered *Pénélope*'s two 1913 premieres included his colleagues, former students, and, in some cases, his friends. It is not unreasonable to assume that these members of the press felt a sense of loyalty to the man whose character they so admired. Even for those critics who did not know Fauré personally, it seems that judgments of *Pénélope* were often conflated with judgments of Fauré as France's "beloved national treasure." To praise his music was to praise the very essence of French culture.

Fauré's public stature and revered reputation almost demanded a glowing reception for *Pénélope*, from both the audience and the critics. This late work provided an opportunity for the Parisian musical community to honor Fauré with their affection and praise. Thus, as we have seen, *Pénélope*'s press coverage cannot be taken at face value. When each review is properly contextualized, however, we gain a clearer understanding for *Pénélope*'s strengths and weaknesses, and can make informed decisions about a possible future for the work.

In his review of *Pénélope*'s London revival for *The Independent*, Michael White points out that it is tempting to dismiss *Pénélope* as an inferior work that deserves its neglect. He finds, however, that it is among the few obscure operas that "beckon like

sirens just beyond the boundaries of the repertoire.”²³⁰ The critic laments that it almost never surfaces on the stage, explaining that “to opera-house intendants, Fauré doesn’t seem like their material... His métier is wistful beauty, and a wandering tonality that homes in on cushioned cadences. It isn’t what a *Tosca* audience is trained to slobber over.” He describes *Pénélope* as predominately an “alluring song” that is, nevertheless, “too ravishing a score to be allowed to go to waste.”

White’s critique echoes many of the reviews cited throughout this thesis. As we have seen, nearly all the critics writing in 1913 agreed that the music found in *Pénélope* was of the highest order. Although the critics’ personal biases cannot be discounted, it is difficult to explain away such a glowing reception as baseless flattery. *Pénélope* may not be the masterpiece the press reported it to be, but it marks an important milestone in its composer’s career. *Pénélope* is an expansion of the direction Fauré was taking in his late songs; the opera brings to full fruition the rich, lyrical melodies, elusive harmonies, and inward spirituality that mark his late style.

With the hundredth anniversary of *Pénélope*’s premiere less than a year away, there is no better time to reexamine this work. Summarizing his discussion of *Pénélope*, Charles Koechlin wrote: “If Fauré’s art, no doubt, will never be popular with the musically uncultivated masses, in compensation one finds even in the most modest seats (and perhaps particularly there)—in the gallery which decided the success of *Pelléas*—fanatics confessing their love.”²³¹ Perhaps *Pénélope* deserves to be loved again.

Just before he died Fauré allegedly said to his sons: “When I am no more, you will hear it said of my work: ‘After all, it didn’t amount to much!’ People will forget it,

²³⁰Michael White, “Fauré’s ‘*Pénélope*’ Just Needs a Touch of Spin,” *The Independent*, 13 June 1999.

²³¹Koechlin, *Gabriel Fauré 1845-1924*, 60.

perhaps...But you must not be troubled or distressed. That is fate; there is always a moment of forgetting...All that is of no importance. I have done what I could...so judge me, my God!"²³² Little by little Fauré's works have been gaining appreciation outside of France. The *Requiem* has become a staple in the choral repertoire; his chamber music has been performed and recorded by the world's leading ensembles; and his songs are considered treasures of the solo vocal literature. It is not unreasonable to hope that *Pénélope* might gain similar recognition in the years to come. I will close with a poignant passage from Paul Landormy's biographical article for *The Musical Quarterly* in which he articulates Fauré's unique place in the history of French music:

To speak of Fauré is to speak, in a way, of what is most intimate and most secret in the genius of France... Under his appearance of wisdom, of reserve, of modesty, he was daring. He revitalized the language of music. He prepared the way for libertines which with Debussy were to amount to a defiance of all the old rules. No more of these iron cages in which dreams are prisoned, in which inspiration breaks its wings! It is because he began to expand these rigid forms, and because he allowed us an intimate glimpse of the very subtle and somewhat sensual dream of a poet alive to the hidden meaning of things, that Gabriel Fauré ranks among those French composers who are most dear to people of a sensitive turn of mind, to those gentle, finely attuned spirits who see themselves reflected in him as in the most faithful of mirrors.²³³

²³²Landormy, *Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)*, 301.

²³³*Ibid.*, 300.

Appendix: List of *Pénélope*'s Reviews from 1913

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