

The Music of Gabriel Dupont by Andrew Hartman

The history of classical music is filled with stories of composers who passed away before their time. Musicologists ponder what might have been if composers such as Mozart and Schubert had lived till Haydn's age. How would the history of classical music have changed? Of course this is all pure speculation as we have no idea if these composers would have continued to produce ever more advanced masterpieces, or have fallen into a creatively sterile period like Rossini or Sibelius. Regardless of the "what ifs" and "might have beens" these composers, along with Bellini, Bizet, Mendelssohn, Purcell and a few others, lived long enough to firmly establish themselves in the pantheon of immortals, despite dying in their thirties. There is another group of composers who were taken before their time, whose stories are in some ways more tantalizing. These are the composers who were either just beginning to show a distinctive genius, or who had produced a few great works with a promise of much more to come, when they were stricken down. This would be a much longer list of names and in some ways is more frustrating to classical music lovers than the early death of acknowledged geniuses who contributed a normal life time's worth of masterpieces in a compressed time period. In this second list of tragic early deaths we could include names like [Arriaga](#), [Lekeu](#), [Hurlstone](#), [Kalinnikov](#), and the composer who will concern us in this article, Gabriel Dupont.

Gabriel Dupont was born in 1878 in the city of Caen, in Normandy, France. Dupont's father, Achille Dupont, was organist at the Cathedral of St. Etienne and gave the boy his start in music. At the age of fifteen, young Dupont journeyed to Paris to join classes at the Conservatoire taught by André Gedalge and Jules Massenet. Two years later he studied with the famous organist Alexandre Guilmant, a friend of his father's. Dupont's most important teacher and influence however, was the great organist and composer Charles-Marie Widor. Dupont studied with Widor from 1897-1903, staying on an additional two years past his normal graduation date with his beloved teacher who became a father figure to the young man when his own father died in 1901. It was also in 1901 that while fulfilling his military service, Dupont came down with a case of pneumonia that was to be the beginning of the tuberculosis that was eventually to shorten his life.

Dupont's first works were songs composed while he was a student at the Paris Conservatoire. He composed a number of student works, mostly chamber music during these years, but later destroyed some of them as juvenilia unworthy of being published. The composer's good friend Louis Vierne wrote later that he frequently sat with Dupont and played through some of these lost pieces. He declared that he was the only person other than Dupont to have heard them, and that some of them were works that should have seen the light of day. During this formative period, Dupont rapidly gained a name for himself in Parisian music circles, and seems to have been well liked by all of his contemporaries. The consensus opinion of Dupont was of a slightly naïve, slightly mischievous provincial, full of a love of life, nature and his art.

As was the case with nearly every French composer, Dupont strove for the Prix de Rome, and in 1901 he came in second place to the fine composer André Caplet. Maurice Ravel was third that year. Dupont also competed for another prestigious award at this time, the Sonzogno prize, awarded in Milan for the best one act opera submitted. The Sonzogno prize was offered by the Italian music publisher Edoardo Sonzogno, and had been running since 1883. Previous winners included Mascagni for *Cavalleria Rusticana*. The jury included such luminaries as Humperdinck and Massenet, and Dupont triumphed over 237 rivals. His victory for his verismo opera **La Cabrera** led to performances at La Scala and at the Opera-Comique in Paris, making him famous.

Just as Dupont was on the verge of launching a major career, tragedy struck. An attack of pneumonia in early 1903 led to a diagnosis of tuberculosis. The composer, accompanied by his devoted mother Delphine, retreated to a TB facility in Cap Ferret, a small village on a sand dune peninsula on the west

coast of France near Bordeaux. While the composer was eventually able to recover enough to leave Cap Ferret and resume his composing career, he never fully recovered his health. For the remaining decade or so that he lived, the shadow of his disease affected every aspect of his life and art. The frequent need for recuperative stays at medical facilities and at his home in Le Vesinet, with the physical isolation and emotional trauma that they involved, coloured his career, his outlook on life, and his music. Indeed, some of his greatest and most well-known compositions deal directly with the effects of his illness.

Gabriel Dupont's oeuvre contains only a few pieces for orchestra. He wrote only one major chamber piece, his **Poème** for piano quintet. Where he concentrated most of his efforts was vocal music and piano music. His piano cycles **Les Heures Dolentes** and **La Maison dans les Dunes** contain some of his greatest music. In the vocal realm, Dupont wrote four operas and thirty songs. He was one of the relatively few composers who excelled at both of these vocal genres. Most outstanding Lieder composers (Schubert, Schumann, Wolf, Brahms) did not excel in the opera form, while the greatest opera composers (Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner, Puccini) did not excel in the Lieder form. While Lieder and opera are both "vocal music", they are extremely different. In Lieder, the music is expressed typically by one singer with piano accompaniment. The goal of Lieder is to best capture the mood and content of the poem being set. The singing is usually restrained, without the coloratura fireworks and raw power that make opera such an exciting, visceral spectacle. The words of the poet being set are paramount and it is often the case that the better the poem, the better the song. Bad poetry is difficult to redeem in the Lieder format, while the history of opera is filled with banal or even incomprehensible librettos that have been turned into operatic masterpieces. Thus the ability to portray musically a poem of genius, bears little resemblance to the ability to compose a dramatically successful opera, with its orchestral accompaniment, choruses, ensembles and virtuosic use of the voice. It is no wonder that it is the rare composer who can master both formats.

Songs

Dupont's oeuvre includes thirty extant songs which received an integral recording from the Timpani label in 2005. The songs cover a seventeen year period, virtually Dupont's entire composing career, and thus provide us with an interesting perspective on the composer's development. The disk is in chronological order and opens with the Paul Verlaine poem **La Pluie**. The poet compares the weeping in his heart to the sound of the rain falling on the ground and the rooftops. What is causing this pain? The poet does not know and that is the hardest part. In this, his first song, Dupont already exhibits the almost mystical quality of his later piano masterpieces **Les Heures Dolentes** and **La Maison dans les Dunes**. A hypnotic and sorrowful depiction by the piano of the rain falling down perfectly illustrates the rain falling in the poet's heart. A second Verlaine setting also from 1895, **Chanson D'Automne**, dwells on the image of autumn as a time of dying, like the dead leaf blown by an ill wind. In this brief song Dupont captures the despair of the narrator with a chilling accompaniment of minor chords only varied by the occasional leap of emotional anguish in the singer's vocal line. Six years separate **Le Foyer**, another Verlaine setting, from its two predecessors. In this beautiful song, the narrator is enjoying a reverie by her hearth, dreaming she is looking into her beloved's eyes. She is enjoying her tea at twilight and feeling the languorous luxury of the moment as she anticipates her nuptials. However, these nuptials have suffered vain delays of many weeks and months and this reverie is what has sustained the narrator. Dupont uses an ABA form to capture the opening reverie, then the distress of the delays, then a return to the reverie and the poem's opening lines. In the song **Monsieur Destin** by Georges Vanor, the narrator laments the powerlessness to fight against destiny despite our efforts to control it. The song was written in the year of Dupont's first illness during his army service and perhaps is his first effort to confront a topic that would play a large part in his music going forward. Unfortunately the poem is undistinguished and Dupont responds with a galloping accompaniment that is fairly mundane. In **Mandoline**, Dupont returns to Verlaine. In this poem, the omniscient narrator comments negatively on the insipid and indolent courtiers and their lovely ladies who beneath the trees listen to a mandolin. Dupont admirably depicts the strumming of the mandolin in the bass and manages to pack into this two minute song a different mood for each of the

four verses in the treble. In **Le Jour Des Morts**, the poet Vanor laments the day of the dead, all of our futile loves, vain dreams and shattered hopes. Dupont does his best with the material giving it a passionate feeling of resignation and dread. In **Annie** to words by Leconte de Lisle the cheerful narrator is headed to see his mistress Annie in the ploughed fields of barley and wheat. He anticipates his delight and with a kiss comforts his troubled beloved's heart. Dupont uses a five note motif with a pause between the first two notes and the last three as the musical underpinning of the poet's joyful journey. **A La Nuit** by Lacaussade is a hymn to the night which lets the world rest from its troubles and labors. Dupont provides an almost operatic treatment of the poem with rippling effects in the piano and passionate outbursts from the singer. In Rimbaud's poem **Les Effares**, five starving urchins huddle against the baker's window on a freezing night and look on as he cheerily bakes his bread in his warm oven. Dupont responds to this indictment of poverty and inequality with a powerful song which expresses the indignation over this injustice. Armand Sylvestre's **En Aimant** is a passionate declaration of a lover who asks his beloved to give him her beautiful mouth to kiss. It is the source of her laughter, her lovely voice, and it will satisfy the poet's desires. Dupont's song is suitably passionate and robust, and transmits the lover's desires fully.

In 1904, the year after his semi-recovery from his first serious attack from tuberculosis, and the year of his operatic breakthrough with **La Cabrera**, Dupont composed a cycle of eight songs entitled **Poèmes D'Automne**. These songs deal with feelings of resignation, the fleeting nature of time and the transience of being, and express a wistful nostalgia hardly surprising in one who has had a recent brush with mortality. Unlike many song cycles which focus on one poet, Dupont uses eight different poets in his cycle, choosing the poems for a unity of mood, not of writing style. The cycle opens with Régnier's **Si j'ai Aimé**. In this brief song, a woman declares that due to his charms, she could not help loving her beloved with a great love even if it ended sadly. In Rimbaud's **Ophelia** a white-veiled phantom floats over the water at night. For over a thousand years Ophelia in her gentle madness has appeared. Dupont illustrates this spooky tale with mysterious ripples in the piano representing the phantom skimming over the water, and ends each of the three verses with a pause and a sad lamenting phrase from the soloist. The song **Au Temps de la Mort des Marjolaines** is a morbid poem by Suart-Merrill telling of a woman who works at her spinning wheel at night. What are you spinning asks the poet? Is it shrouds for your dreams, the death of love, the dying of the flowers in autumn? Is it the autumn wind, the frost in the valley? Dupont's accompaniment to this mournful poem reminds one of Schubert's *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel* with its hypnotic piano motif representing the whirring of the wheel. In **La Fontaine de Pitié** the poet Bataille has written a hymn to tears, our constant, inexhaustible companion for consolation from childhood till the end of our lives. Dupont captures the lugubrious sentiment but brings some light to the music, realizing that while tears are usually shed in moments of sadness, they can also be consoling. In **La Neige** Paul Verlaine evokes a barren plain covered with snow where the moon disappears, the trees vanish in the mist, and crows and emaciated wolves suffer. Dupont conjures the endless falling snow, breaking into the gloom for a heartrending episode when the starving animals are evoked in the penultimate verse. The next poem in the cycle is Greg'h's **Le Silence de l'eau**. A large fountain that had sobbed night and day by a tomb is suddenly silenced. Only the wind rustling the leaves is now heard. But the sadness continues, it has merely been transmuted from the mournful tears of the fountain to the mute sob of the stilled water played with by the wind. Dupont depicts the fountain in the first two verses, then continues with halting chords and sobbing vocal lines in the final two verses after the fountain dies. In **Douceur du Soir** the poet Rodenbach sings the praises of the coming of dusk. It gently creeps into the room like a good way to die. One's image in the mirror slowly fades, the pictures on the wall fade to memory, and one thinks of one's lover as her image too blends into the sweet darkness. One can imagine Dupont in his sick room living this poem every evening. This is perhaps the most beautiful of the *Poèmes D'Automne*. It rings true of personal experience. **Sur le vieux Banc** by Dierx ends the cycle on a high note of inspiration. The poet sings there is only one star in the heaven, one path before the door, one song from the orchard, one breath on the heath, one shepherd's fire, one perfume in the house, one bell that tolls, one swallow out of reach, one sail on the water, one glow worm in the grass and one nest in the arbour. Likewise there is only one love that comforts us at death, a love

that radiates, caresses, and guides us as we reach the eternal slumber. Dupont beautifully portrays the lonely resignation, without fear, of facing mortality. This cycle of songs rings with the sincerity of personal experience and feeling and is all the more poignant for that. Just don't listen to it when you are depressed!

In **Journée D'Hiver**, Dierx's bleak poem equating the coming of a winter's night with the coming of death, Dupont couples a sad, plodding, chordal piano accompaniment with an increasingly desperate vocal line as the singer's fear and terror grow as he contemplates the physical and moral blackness around him. Regnier's **Le Jardin Mouillé** describes a rainy day in the poet's garden as he contemplates it through the window of his room. It is remarkable how much of Dupont's music uses poems and imagery that narrate from the perspective of a shut-in watching life go by outside his room. In this song the piano beautifully illustrates the rain falling in the garden. At the last verse however, Dupont ends with a few desolate chords dying away as the poet speaks of the shadow he has created for himself as, eyes closed, he listens to the rain in the garden. The rain may give life to the garden, but it is a tragic metaphor for the poet. In **Les Caresses** a girl ecstatically praises her beloved's voice which she says is like a caress. It is the sound, not the words that entrance her. Dupont admirably captures the hypnotic rapture of the girl in Richepin's poem. In a change of pace, the **Chanson des Noisettes** by Klingsor is a delightful trifle. It concerns three hazelnuts on a twig in the forest. As a snail crawls by they call to him to take them as his fiancée, but he ignores them and crawls on by. Then a squirrel comes along and eats them all. Dupont provides a suitably lively and childlike accompaniment to this bit of nonsense. In Verhaeren's **Pieusement**, the distraught poet prays to an unresponsive heaven, becoming increasingly emotional until he feels he is going insane. In this song, in both the piano accompaniment and the vocal line, Dupont provides an almost operatic drama and passion that well matches the words of the poem. In **O Triste, Triste ...** by Paul Verlaine, Dupont's favourite poet, the narrator laments the sadness of his soul brought about by a woman. Although he has broken away from her in both heart and soul, he still finds no consolation. Interestingly, Dupont provides a lengthy solo piano coda to this song, as if trying to express in pure music the sadness that words are insufficient to express.

In **Chanson**, the first of two poems by de Musset, the poet asks his feeble heart if it is better to be constant, both in love and sadness. His heart responds that in both cases, frequent changes make the memories of the past sweeter. Dupont treats the first and third verse questions differently than the second and fourth verse answers, accentuating musically the flow of the poem. In **Sérénade à Ninon** the poet asks Ninon how she can live without love. Springtime is passing and winter will eventually arrive yet she flits from one thing to the next while missing the only thing that really matters. As in several other songs, Dupont ends this piece with a return statement of the first verse, a practice he evidently felt emphasized the core meaning of the poem. Dupont returned to Richepin for two songs in 1911. In the first, **La Rencontre**, the maiden recounts her first encounter with her beloved, waxing eloquent over his voice, his mouth, his eyes, and his brow. Dupont responds with a piano and vocal line that captures the exuberance of first love. In **Le Baiser**, the maiden compares her lover's kiss to sugared almonds and spice, to cool water and hot embers, to hot liqueur and cool berries. Dupont gives us a languorous melody that captures the sensuous imagery of the poem. In Perin's **Crépuscule D'été**, the poet comes upon a clump of night flowers on a summer's evening and dreams of transfusing his soul into theirs. In the final verse he declares that while everything dies, he believes the soul is eternal and he wonders what soul will take his own when he dies. Dupont gives us a meditative atmosphere, neither happy nor tragic, as he contemplates a subject he no doubt spent many hours considering in his many hours in his sick bed. In Richepin's **Chanson des Six Petits Oiseaux** the poet laments the departure of the six little birds. They were the song in his heart, the music that filled his mind, and the hope that sustained his boat of dreams. Their departure emptied his soul. He doesn't know why or where they have gone but they won't return Dupont gives us a perky melody to accompany this lengthy poem, with a suitably melancholic ending.

In summing up Dupont's achievement in the field of the Lied, one can say that he combined a talent for understanding the heart of a poem and illustrating it with sensitivity and beauty, with a musical sincerity born of personal experience. In particular, his representation in many songs of the tragic soul watching life go by without him places him among those few composers who powerfully portrayed their own feelings of mortality. As mortality is something we will all face, Dupont's songs exhibit a universality that earns the name of high art.

Les Heures Dolentes

Most of us at one time or another have experienced being confined to bed rest in our room due to an illness, even if it was only for something as common as influenza. Some of us have also witnessed loved ones such as elderly parents or grandparents confined to a hospital room that both we and the patient know they might never leave alive. Such a situation has a peculiar effect on one's perceptions. After being part of the daily hustle and bustle of life, often racing from one thing to the next without much thought, we suddenly find ourselves observers of life, outside the main stream. We are suddenly aware of little things we might not normally take the time to notice, such as the sound of the rain pattering on the window, or the play of light as the day progresses from dawn to dusk. Our world narrows to the confines of four walls, and our thoughts are concentrated inwards. Small things, such as a friend visiting with flowers, or the daily rounds of the doctor, become the highlight of our days, and the difference between day and night becomes less distinct.

In 1903, Gabriel Dupont suffered his first bout of tuberculosis, the illness that was to claim his life eleven years later. During the long convalescence he underwent, Dupont undoubtedly experienced the feelings and perspectives of the invalid. The musical result of this experience was the piano cycle **Les Heures Dolentes**, or The Sad Hours. This cycle of fourteen piano miniatures, with their descriptive titles, represent Dupont's emotional diary of illness and recovery. In their powerful portrayal of a man facing his own death, they remind one of some of the late works of Schubert that so overwhelmingly portray similar emotions. They also remind one of some of Schumann's piano cycles, another composer haunted by fears and illness. In style they owe something to Debussy and Fauré. The cycle is dedicated to Engelbert Humperdinck, whom the composer had met as one of the judges who awarded him the Sonzogno prize.

The cycle opens with **Epigraphe**, a somber piece that sets the stage for what's to come. This is followed by **Le Soir Tombe dans la Chambre**. As evening falls in the invalid's room, shapes become indistinct and the veil of night descends. In Dupont's depiction, night does not come in with fear or vengeance, but as a friend. The music is incredibly gentle and dreamlike putting the listener into a trancelike state of repose. **Du Soleil au Jardin** follows. The sun floods the garden and the invalid looks on with joy. Perhaps he will be permitted to go out into the garden and enjoy the warmth and light of the sun. The music is full of joy and hope, and appreciation of something as simple as the sun on flowers. In the **Chanson de la Pluie** the weather has changed to rain but it appears to be a gentle rain. Dupont depicts the hypnotic repetitive sounds of the rain in a relaxed, meditative way. With **Après-midi de Dimanche** we have arrived at Sunday afternoon. It is a day of rest and the music reflects calm repose and the delights of simply doing nothing. In **Le Médecin** we have a visit from the doctor. The doctor seems very gentle and reassuring and the patient drifts off to sleep by the end of the piece. A musical knock on the door and a friend comes with flowers in **Une Amie Est Venue Avec Des Fleurs**. The delighted patient is filled with joy and appreciation at this token of esteem and concern from his friend. In line with the invalid's spectator role in life, the next piece depicts **La Chanson du Vent**. The song the wind makes as a storm blows up is beautifully depicted by Dupont with arpeggios, trills and crashing chords. After this windy episode we are at the fireside in **Au Coin du Feu**. There are few things more comforting than a fireside on a winter's night. To an invalid this is especially so as it warms his chills and cheers his mood with its dancing flames. Even though one is ill and in bed, one can still engage in harmless coquetry with nurses or female friends. In **Coquetteries** Dupont depicts the cheery banter of such a situation with a lively, mischievous piece. Despite the coquetry, death lurks behind the scenes in **La Mort Rode**. It opens with a sinister, softly repetitive

phrase as if death is stealthily stealing into the room. This is interrupted by eruptions in the lower register of the bass that appear to depict the racking cough of the TB sufferer. The situation becomes grim as the music becomes more hopeless and fainter, as if life is ebbing away. All is not lost however as the new day dawns and the patient hears children playing in the garden in **Des Enfants Jouent au Jardin**. The invalid hears the joyful shouts of the children. He is briefly bitter at his state as compared to theirs, Children are innocent and have no conception of mortality as it is too far off for them to worry about, unlike the suffering invalid. In the end, after alternating moods, the joy of the children cheers the patient. In **Nuit Blanche. Hallucinations**, the longest piece of the cycle, Dupont depicts the fearful and sinister hallucinations brought on by his medicine. Arresting passages in the bass and crashing chords whip up a terrible, desperate fear. This piece is a *tour de force* of descriptive writing for the piano. After this horrible experience, the patient makes it through the worst of the illness and is restored to **Calme**. In this final piece of the cycle we see the sun return and with it hope for recovery. We have journeyed with Dupont on a fearful ride to the jaws of death and back, and shared with him the unexpected and often surprising perspectives of the invalid, both good and bad. In this powerful, emotional cycle Dupont created a masterpiece. The great writer and critic Romain Rolland (author of "Jean-Christophe", the greatest novel about classical music that I have read), wrote of this cycle that it was "the melancholic, feverish and poetic novel of a sick young artist. The work has both a human interest and a great artistic charm."

As Dupont emerged from his convalescence he looked to resume his artistic career, particularly in the field of opera. The Sonzogno prize for **La Cabrera** enabled the composer to have it performed in Paris where it was successfully received. This brought him fame and financial security. He followed up this success in 1908 with the opera **La Glu**, a four act drama based on a work by Richepin, whose poems Dupont had also set as songs. The opera was premiered in Nice to excellent reviews. It is a lurid verismo tale of a Carmen like siren who wreaks havoc in men's lives and who is eventually killed with an axe by the mother of one of the men caught in her web. As 1910 began, the composer's illness was in enough of a remission for him to hope for a long term future. Artistically this was expressed by another vocal work, **La Farce du Cuvier**, and another piano cycle, **La Maison dans les Dunes**. The former was a high spirited operetta, very different from **La Cabrera** and **La Glu**. The latter was founded on Dupont's impressions from Cap Ferret, where he had previously recuperated from his illness. While not without its darker sides, this cycle was much more upbeat than **Les Heures Dolentes**.

La Maison dans les Dunes

The cycle commences with **Dans Les Dunes Par Un Clair Matin**. This depiction of a clear morning on the dunes opens with a brief passage to set the scene, as of one pulling back the curtains to look outside. It then develops into a cheerful scene painting of a bright morning on the seashore with rippling waves and light breezes. With **Voiles Sur l'eau**, the nautical theme continues with Dupont's impression of sails on the water. It is a tranquil sea as the boats skim along, sometimes slowly, sometimes with alacrity. In **La Maison Du Souvenir** Dupont recalls the house where several years earlier he had stayed while recovering from his illness. The remembrance is mostly a tender one as rather than associating it with bad memories and suffering, Dupont remembers it as a place of healing and consolation. The stormy **Mon Frère Le Vent Et Ma Soeur La Pluie** has the composer treating the violent wind and the pouring rain of the region as his brother and sister, as beloved relatives instead of inconveniences or enemies. In the oxymoronic **Mélancolie Du Bonheur** Dupont gently illustrates that in some situations even happiness can be melancholy. Whether he is expressing the melancholy of seeing the happiness of others he cannot fully share in, or whether he is expressing a remembrance of prior melancholy at Cap Ferret although he is happy now, is not entirely clear but it is a beautiful piece. We have all experienced the play of the sun on the waves, how it sparkles like diamonds or shimmers like gold. Dupont depicts this in **Le Soleil Se Joue Dans Les Vagues**. The piece is in an ABA format. The A section is an elfin fairy like dance while the B section is a stately, magisterial passage. In **Le Soir Dans Les Pins** Dupont takes us to an evening among the pines on the sand dune peninsula. It is a mysterious, slightly sinister visit. The composer continues

the night mood with **Le Bruissement De La Mer La Nuit**. Most of us have had the experience of standing on a beach at night and hearing the waves but not seeing them. The feeling of hidden power and ceaseless activity is captured by Dupont with a rather dark and unexpectedly gentle piece. The wind is calm and the waves are rustling, not crashing. The last piece of the nighttime portrayal is **Clair D'Etoiles**. Here Dupont portrays the clear starry night with a hushed, awestruck gentleness. Indeed there are few things more humbling than a dark clear sky full of stars, something we rarely see in these modern days of artificial light pollution. The cycle ends with the longest piece, **Houles**. The wind has kicked up and the gentle ocean of the night is now full of swells. One of the most fascinating things about the ocean is how gentle and calm it can be one day, and how destructive and violent it can be the next. In this piece Dupont pulls out all the stops to illustrate a stormy sea. As the piece (and the entire cycle) ends however, Dupont calms the sea and leaves us with a tender farewell. **La Maison dans les Dunes** is another triumph for Dupont, whose scene painting and mood painting on the piano is one of his greatest attributes as a composer.

Poème

Dupont wrote little chamber music. There is the **Journée de Printemps**, his two movement work for violin and piano, and there is his **Poème** for piano and string quartet. This impressive work was dedicated to his master Widor. It is in three movements entitled "Dark and Painful", "Clear and Calm", and "Happy and Sunny". In this major work it is as if Dupont is chronicling his journey from his first attack of his illness in 1903, to its apparent remission in 1911. Composers had increasingly been attracted to the power of the piano quintet instrumentation and it is likely that Dupont knew the masterworks in this genre by Schumann, Dvorak, Brahms, Franck and the first piano quintet of Fauré. His friend Vierne was to write his piano quintet masterpiece six years later, and four years after that Fauré (a great admirer of Dupont's music) was to compose his magisterial second piano quintet. Dupont's is certainly one of the finest piano quintets of the era.

The opening of **Poème** is an arresting passage for the solo piano then the stormy main theme is heard in the full ensemble. A somewhat gentler second theme arrives but the dark mood continues. Dupont gives all the instruments a chance to shine with emotional and sometimes harrowing solo passages, not just for the piano but for the strings as well. About one third through this massive fifteen minute opening movement there is a ghostly theme complete with tremolos that sends shivers up one's spine. One is reminded of some passages in Schubert's late quartets. Near the close of the movement a transfigured version of the main theme as a tender angelic reverie is briefly heard before the dark and stormy conclusion. The second movement opens with a consoling song in the strings with the piano providing a subtle commentary in the bass. The mood may be clear and calm but it is far from happy. A bouncy solo piano passage starts the closing movement and launches us into a sunny theme, although tremolos add a touch of clouds. The piano seems to be trying to convince the strings it is fine to be happy now and eventually the strings are convinced though it takes some persuasion. In Dupont's music unalloyed joy is rarely met with. There is usually an undercurrent of sadness even in his brighter moods. A puckish pizzicato theme arrives mid-way in the movement and is eventually played as counterpoint to the main theme. A brief yearning passage in the strings is dispelled by the happy theme, then the opening theme from the first movement is heard (in true Franckian cyclical fashion) but transformed from tragedy to joy.

Poème has been recorded by the Timpani label on a disk that also includes François Kerdoncuff playing **La Maison dans les Dunes**. The piano cycle has also been recorded by Catherine Girod on the Mirare label, Emile Naoumoff on Saphir, [Bernard Paul-Reynier](#) on Passavant and [Stéphane Lemelin](#) on Atma. **Les Heures Dolentes** has been recorded by Lemelin and Naoumoff, and excerpts have been recorded by Girod.

Antar

The origins of Dupont's last and greatest work go back to 1910 when the composer attended the play 'Antar' at the Odéon-Théâtre in Paris. This work, by the Syrian poet Chekri-Ganem who was residing

in Paris at the time, is based on the ancient Arab epic poem 'Antar', which has been called the Arab Iliad. It dates from the 7th century B.C. and tells the story of Antar, a black slave who won his liberty from his Arab captors through his military daring. He also became a great poet. The story is as follows. Abla, daughter of the Arab leader Malek, has been captured by an enemy tribe. Antar rescues Abla and he and the grateful girl fall in love. Antar asks Malek for Abla's hand in marriage as a reward for his heroic rescue, and because the two are in love. Malek at first agrees but another Arab leader, Amarat, objects. He also covets Abla and playing on Malek's prejudices against the outsider declares that before Antar is granted Abla he must go on a quest to prove his worthiness. Malek agrees and Amarat suggests a quest that is so difficult he is convinced Antar will never return. Antar is given the task of bringing back the diadem of the Persian King, and the magic steed Ophir and his golden shoes. Against all odds, Antar succeeds and returns to claim Abla. The jealous Amarat however will not give up. He arranges for Zobeir, the chief of the enemy tribe to ambush Antar in a lonely mountain pass with a poison arrow. The poet and hero dies a noble death alone. This plot, with its echoes of Othello, its love interest, its father-daughter conflict, a jealous lover, and a noble hero who dies alone, appealed strongly to Dupont. Rimsky-Korsakov had previously used the tale as the inspiration for his marvelous Symphony No. 2 *Antar*.

The composer set to work and by early 1914 the opera was completed and was scheduled for the Paris Opera. Dupont attended to all aspects of the preparations even though it was undermining his fragile health. He confided to his friend the pianist Maurice Dumesnil in July 1914 "I want to see my *Antar* on the stage for I have truly put my utmost sincerity, energy and passion into it." Dumesnil recalled meeting Dupont leaving a rehearsal in late July, breathing heavily and exhausted, but determined to press on. It was not to be. All during the summer the threat of war had hovered over Europe. To the end, Dupont had been in denial about it. He told Dumesnil "But there simply cannot be war. How could it happen with our degree of civilization? No, they'll get it together in some way and peace will be preserved." As July ended with the war looming, the opera was postponed and the critically ill Dupont retreated to his home outside Paris in Le Vesinet. Dumesnil recalled that the night Dupont died, August 1st, 1914, the last thing he heard was the caissons rolling by on their way to the front as France mobilized for war. He cried out "Do you hear? The guns are passing by. War ... war is here." He died in despair, knowing that the war he feared had come, and that he would not live to see *Antar*, the masterpiece he had poured his soul into, performed.

The Great War finally passed and the cultural life of Paris eventually began to revive. Dupont's friends pushed for a premiere of *Antar* as a tribute to the composer and in March 1921 the work finally premiered at the Paris Opera to rave reviews. The famous critic [Henri Collet](#) (who coined the term *Les Six*), wrote that *Antar* was the most purely musical and purely human work to be premiered at the Opera since *Carmen*. He said it epitomized its creator who like Antar was a poet hero of a fair dream of love and of spiritual joy when he was struck down by a malevolent fate at a young age. Collet went on to say that the music of *Antar* leads us back to nature, to health, to youth, and to virtue.

The opera's first act is set in the desert and begins without a prelude, getting us right into the action with galloping, martial music and off-stage shouts of soldiers hailing Antar's victory over their enemy Zobeir. The heroic Antar has prevailed and Abla is freed. Antar sings of his love for Abla. Malek promises Abla to the hero but Amarat suggests the quest Antar should be sent on to prove his worthiness for Abla. Malek agrees. Abla cries out but Antar agrees to go and bids her farewell as the act ends. The second act is set in an oasis. It starts with a great scene for Abla, who accompanied by her confidant Selma sings of her love for Antar. In this scene Dupont's brilliant orchestration contains many "Orientalist" touches. The vocal line looks forward to the operas of Paliashvili ("*Absalom & Eteri*" (1918) and "*Daisi*" (1923)) and at the end of the scene the ladies join together in a brief duet with echoes of Delibes' "*Lakmé*". Abla tells her father she loves Antar and will wait for him but Amarat taunts her that Antar is dead. She won't believe it. Suddenly Antar returns victorious and the lovers express their delight. A ballet interlude celebrates Antar's return. The third act takes place in a

defile in the mountains. After an orchestral interlude labeled 'Nocturne', Amarat and Zobeir discuss their plot to ambush Antar. Antar meets Aba and they sing a glorious duet which is followed by a passionate solo aria by Antar, a highlight of the opera. Zobeir confronts Antar and the two sing a stormy duet then Zobeir shoots Antar with the poison arrow. Antar falls wounded as the act ends. The fourth act, set in the same location, encompasses the death of Antar. A brilliant and lengthy orchestral interlude labeled 'La Mort' depicts the agony of the mortally wounded hero. Antar then sings his great death scene (a lengthy and extremely taxing scene for the tenor) and the opera ends on a tragic note.

A fine live recording of **Antar** is available from Premiereopera.net.

Dupont's early death, as with all similar early deaths of great artists, leads us to lament what might have been. If only he had lived on for decades to come, giving us many additional great works to enjoy. Yet who can tell what might have happened. Would Dupont, if he had lived through the Great War, the inter-war years, and World War II have remained true to his artistic credo and his great teachers? Probably. Would he have been dismissed by the young revolutionaries of the twenties and thirties as a dinosaur whose music was out of step with the present? Probably. Would he have suffered the same artistic oblivion that many composers who stayed true to their youthful pre-war credos suffered? Most likely. Dupont, like his great contemporary Albéric Magnard (who also died in August 1914, literally a casualty of the War), died when his age died. The great cultural advance of 19th century European civilization that had stretched one hundred years from Napoleon's defeat to the start of the Great War was about to come crashing down. Perhaps, at least artistically speaking, fate knew best after all.

Gabriel Dupont once confided to Romain Rolland his artistic credo. He said he wanted to be "singing in people's hearts, exalting their life, and consoling them in their suffering; that is all my joy and ambition as an artist." In that ambition Gabriel Dupont succeeded.

Andrew Hartman