



For the Fallen

Sébastien Hurtaud commemorates First World War dead with world premiere recording of Gareth Farr's *Chemin des Dames* and revelatory interpretation of Elgar's Cello Concerto

Rubicon Classics album presents potent creative alliance between a French cellist, a composer and orchestra from New Zealand, an Australian conductor and a British record label

Of the many artworks created to commemorate the First World War's centenary, *Chemin des Dames* is among the most personal. Gareth Farr's concerto for cello and orchestra, dedicated 'to the memory of the combatants of the First World War and the fundamental role of women in the rear,' also stands as a tribute to his three great-granduncles, killed while fighting in France. The single-movement work's world premiere recording, made by its dedicatee Sébastien Hurtaud in company with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and Benjamin Northey, is set for release on Rubicon Classics on Friday 6 November. It is coupled with Elgar's Cello Concerto, another composition marked by the tragic legacy of the so-called 'war to end all wars'.

Sébastien Hurtaud's album evokes the international mix of forces that fought in northern France over a century ago. It represents a more peaceful, certainly more creative alliance. The French cellist made the recording in partnership with a composer and orchestral players from New Zealand, an Australian conductor and a British record label. "I'm so pleased about these links to the Commonwealth countries and France," he comments. "It has been an amazing collaboration with Gareth, Ben Northey and the wonderful musicians of the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra. Matthew Cosgrove at Rubicon has been a great support and was so open to my idea of recording Gareth's piece together with the Elgar. I believe it's so important to build artistic bridges between countries, especially today when there is so much division in the world."

Hurtaud was educated in part by his great-grandmother. She regularly spoke of her upbringing in La Rochelle in the early 1900s and the deep emotions she experienced as a teenager at the sight of shellshocked soldiers returning home after the Armistice. "When she talked about that, it felt to me like it had happened only yesterday. It was not like the history you learn at school; it was part of my life."

The road to *Chemin des Dames* started in 2009 when Sébastien Hurtaud travelled to New Zealand and won the Adam International Cello Competition in Christchurch. When he returned two years later for a national tour with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra, he met Gareth Farr, one of New Zealand's leading composers. They soon became friends, not least because of their shared interest in the First World War. The relationship deepened after Farr heard that Creative New Zealand was looking to commission works to mark the war's centenary. His thoughts immediately turned to the idea of creating a cello concerto as a memorial to his great-granduncles and the millions who died during the conflict. Although he received the commission, he decided not to compose a note before he had visited northern France.

Of the many battle sites that Farr and Hurtaud explored together in the summer of 2016, they were moved most deeply by the Caverne du Dragon. The ancient stone quarry, by the *Chemin des Dames* crest line, became a strategic redoubt much fought over during the First World War. It was captured by German forces in January 1915 and held until it was recaptured two-and-a-half years later chiefly by Senegalese tirailleurs attached to the French Army.

"The Dragon's Cave was a refuge for both sides during the war," explains Sébastien Hurtaud. "Today you take a lift fifteen metres underground and reach somewhere silent, humid and dark. We were totally shocked when we saw this place. Gareth originally wanted to call his cello concerto Requiem, but decided the title was too linked to one religion. He decided to call it *Chemin de Dames* because this was the region where his great-granduncles died and, more generally, because it reflects the pathway taken by women during the war out of the home, into factories and employment and on towards emancipation."

Chemin des Dames, literally the 'ladies' path', takes its name from the high road between Laon and Reims, site of one of the bloodiest battles of 1917. The composition's nine-month gestation period ran in parallel with Hurtaud's wife's pregnancy. Its score was delivered just days before the birth of the cellist's daughter. "Gareth composed a very short song inspired by Stella, my daughter's name," he recalls. "My wife and I were so grateful for this but we were completely amazed when he told us that he'd put his Stella theme into the cello concerto's



cadenza! The piece begins and ends in the dark of No Man's Land, but this moment in the cadenza represents the light of hope."

Sébastien Hurtaud gave the world premiere of *Chemin des Dames* with the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra in Wellington in May 2017. He joined the Orchestre national de Metz to give its European premiere five months later at Laon Cathedral and performed the work again a few days before the centenary of the Armistice in November 2018 at Les Invalides in Paris. "With this music, which is so powerful, you have to find a way not to overplay what's there in the writing," the cellist comments. "It's like being an actor who has to bring his part to life. My only way to play this music is to imagine I'm a soldier and that I have to stay alive."

Hurtaud was understandably apprehensive about recording Elgar's Cello Concerto, a piece so closely associated with Jacqueline du Pré. He was certain, however, that it made the ideal companion for *Chemin des Dames*. The piece was written in the summer of 1919 in the Sussex village where just a year earlier Elgar had heard artillery fire rumbling across the English Channel. "Of course I am so impressed, even amazed by Jacqueline du Pré's Elgar," reflects Hurtaud. "But I decided absolutely not to listen to her recordings when preparing for this album. It was a chance for me to rediscover the Elgar from the perspective of Gareth's composition and our visit to the Dragon's Cave. It was a long process to 'consume' this music and discover the piece again but it meant that this is *my* Elgar Cello Concerto"

The cellist imagined that Elgar, in addition to mourning a lost generation and a lost world, was thinking of his former fiancée Helen Weaver while writing his new work for cello and orchestra. She had broken their engagement and moved from Worcester to New Zealand in the early 1880s, where she married a banker. Her son, Kenneth Munro, was killed while fighting with the Anzacs near Armentières in April 1916. It appears that Elgar experienced severe depression after he noticed Munro's name in the *Daily Telegraph's* casualty list and may have recalled his melancholia when composing the Cello Concerto.

"This work, to me, is a Requiem for the son Elgar never had," Sébastien Hurtaud observes. "Perhaps he was still in love with the woman he had hoped to marry almost forty years earlier. This idea totally changed my way of playing the piece. I see the Elgar and Gareth's concertos as ritualistic works, written to honour the memory of so many and so much that was destroyed."

For more on the making of *Chemin des Dames* see [here](#)

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Elgar and Farr, release date 6 November 2020 (Rubicon Classics)

Sébastien Hurtaud cello | **Benjamin Northey** conductor | **New Zealand Symphony Orchestra**

Elgar Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85

Gareth Farr *Chemin des Dames*