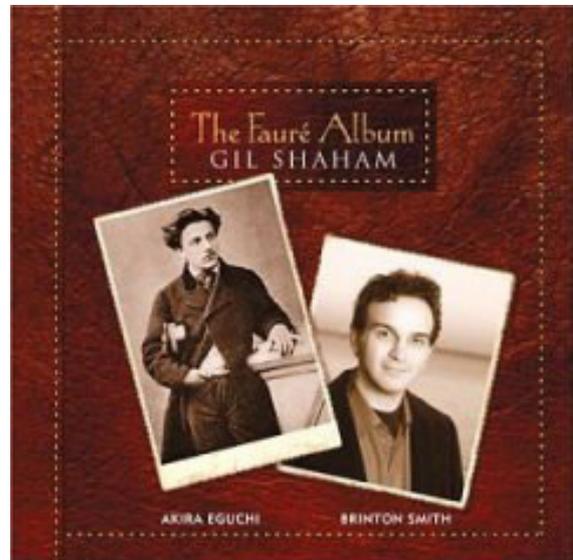




A Conversation with Gil Shaham

Grammy® Award-winning violinist Gil Shaham has earned a place in the hearts of music lovers around the world with his winning personality and performances of exceptional vitality. Critics praise the luminous brilliance of his sound and naturalness of his interpretations, while audiences delight in his warmth and exuberance. (For an interviewer, Shaham presents additional delights: he's an extremely funny and endearing person who knows that music is both a serious art and also an opportunity to have an incredibly good time!)



Over the years, Shaham's recordings for Deutsche Grammophon have garnered both praise and sales. His His Violin Concertos by Barber and Korngold became an instant classic, earning top honors in the *Penguin Guide to Compact Discs* with a coveted "Rosette" recommendation. Recently, Shaham charted a new course for his recording activities, fulfilling a long-held dream of recording chamber music by his "unsung hero" Gabriel Fauré on his own record label. The Fauré Album is the first release on Canary Classics (in association with Vanguard Classics). iClassics spoke with Shaham about his new ventures as a recording executive and as a first-time parent.

iClassics.com: You've described yourself as a "Fauré Fanatic". You don't often hear that word associated with Fauré. When did you catch the Fauré bug?

Gil Shaham: I've played Fauré's first *Violin Sonata* for the past 20 years and I've known the *Berceuse* a long time. But in recent years, I began to learn more of his violin music - and I discovered gem after gem. I had the same feeling when I discovered Brahms's chamber music: this was just incredibly beautiful music.

Fauré's music is often described as "elegant" and "expertly crafted," which is sometimes a polite way of saying something's cautious or dispassionate — or worse, precious. What do you think? Any danger of that?

There's something almost miraculous about Fauré's ability to capture human emotion in his music, and his ability to connect naturally with listeners. I'll give you one example from my own experience making our new recording. I didn't know the poem for the song version of *Claire de Lune*, but after I recorded the work with Akira (N.B.: Shaham's long-time recital and recording partner, pianist Akira Eguchi), I read it, and I was just amazed at how perfectly the poem fit the feeling of the music. There's a melancholy quality to his music that people find very moving.

I learned the *Tuscan Serenade* for this album. It was based on a song he wrote after Marianne Viardot turned down his proposal of marriage. All his music afterwards was tinged with melancholy - this was a big disillusionment for him.

Fauré was a very humble and modest man, but he was also a great master. He was an important and progressive teacher who revolutionized the French way of teaching composition while he was head of the Paris Conservatory. At a time when many composers were writing grandiose works - this was the age of Wagner and Grand Opera - and engaging in wave after wave of musical experimentation, Fauré held to his own beliefs and wrote intimate works like songs, short piano pieces and chamber works.

Could you call him a kind of insider secret?

Well, some of his works are very popular - the *Requiem* for example. But it's true people who really know Fauré — particularly musicians — love his music. Pianists think Fauré is their composer. Singers think Fauré is *their* composer. But violinists KNOW that Fauré is *our* composer! I was visiting a museum in San Francisco and saw the bow that Jascha Heifetz used. It has four names engraved on it: Heifetz, Beethoven, Brahms and Fauré! And audiences love his chamber music too: every time we play Fauré in concert we get an amazing reaction. It really is as beautiful as music can be.

How do you like recording for your own label?

Making your own CD is like being a chef opening your own restaurant. It's a bit of a risk but I'm young enough and lucky enough to try to do it. I have incredible freedom, which I'm relishing. The best part of doing it on our own was our ability to set our own priorities with the choice of repertoire, equipment, instruments and venue. Akira brought in the piano he wanted to use — not just the one that was available — and we recorded at the Academy of Arts and Letters in New York, which is a legendary venue where a lot of great classical recordings have been made. It has superb acoustics.

I'm especially pleased with the sound quality we've gotten with this first CD, and doing it yourself gives you the freedom with every aspect of it. Dahong Seeto engineered and produced it for us, and he's an award-winning producer. We recorded in surround sound, 96kh and 24-bit, and the CD will also come out in SACD format.

Also, we commissioned the liner notes from Jessica Duchon, who wrote an important Fauré biography. I even got to name my own company - Canary Classics. To use the restaurant analogy again, I can put as much chili in the jambalaya as I want!

Why Canary Classics?

Well, a canary is a songbird, but also, "Canar" is the Hebrew word for violinist.

What other recording activities do you have on the horizon?

In 2004 I'll be recording the Beethoven Triple Concerto with Yefim Bronfman and Truls Mørk with David Zinman conducting the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra. And Truls and I will do the Beethoven Septet with members of the Tonhalle.

All of the musicians I'll be working with on this project are people whose artistry I've loved for years. But I also know them as friends, which makes this extra special. I love playing trios with Yefim and Truls. We toured together last year and we want to do more. We have

a blast — they are great musicians, and working with them is as good as it gets. We're just having fun, traveling around, goofing off when we're not onstage, and playing Tchaikovsky and Schubert and other composers we love.

What about concerts?

I'm taking the Fauré repertoire on tour this fall, and then I'm looking forward to doing a tour in the winter with the San Francisco Symphony and Michael Tilson Thomas, playing the Violin Concerto by Alban Berg. I've played with MTT since I was 15 and he's wanted to do the Berg with me since I was 18! It's a very special piece - an incredible trip! Every great piece has its own technique, and for this you need to get into a special groove. It takes a while. You have to be in tune with the way it starts with open strings. Very challenging, but even more rewarding than it is challenging.

Do you prefer to do concerto performances or recitals?

I love doing both, but concerts have their complications. With recitals I can be very flexible with repertoire. So many factors with concertos — what the conductor knows and wants and likes, and the orchestra knows and wants and likes and the marketing department knows and wants and likes...but overall, I've felt freer and freer these days and can do a lot more than I ever expected I'd be able to do as a musician. I'm very grateful. I feel very lucky!

Even though you're barely in your 30s you've been recording and touring for a long time. What's the prognosis for classical music, in your opinion?

I think this is a very exciting time for classical musicians and audiences. There are so many more musicians out there and composers. Conservatories are fuller than they've ever been - this has been a trend for the past ten years. Technology has helped this become a time for artists. We've never been able to make such high quality recordings and even transmit them directly to our audiences as we can today. Independent record companies like Naxos seem to be thriving, and artist-based companies like LSO Live are having a lot of success, as are the smart indie labels.

Has becoming a father changed your career?

This has been an incredibly happy year. We have a great family — I'm lucky to be married to Adele (N.B.: violinist Adele Anthony) and have this beautiful son. Even the very first few weeks after he was born we would do anything and everything to make him happy. Unlike you and me young babies' moods are not determined by concepts — they respond to stimuli. If something happens very fast or too fast — or too slow or too loud — they'll let you know. The quality of the stimulus really affects their mood, too. And that is music and what music is all about. It's about relating to people in a very deep, non-verbal way. I think that having a child has made me appreciate how significant music is to our "non verbal" self. Does that sound a bit too "New Agey?" I hope not, because I think it's really true.