

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-90)

The organ music of César Franck

- 1857 Andantino in G minor
- 1862 Six Pièces:
 Fantaisie in C Op.16
 Grande Pièce Symphonique Op.17
 Prélude, Fugue et Variation Op.18
 Pastorale Op.19
 Prière Op.20
 Final Op.21
- 1878 Trois Pièces:
 Fantaisie in A
 Cantabile
 Pièce Héroïque
- 1890 Trois Chorals:
 No.1 in E
 No.2 in B minor
 No.3 in A minor

The harmonium music

- 1846 Pièce in Eb
- 1859 Trois Antiennes
- c.1860 Pièces Posthumes (44 pieces published after the composer's death)
- 1864 Cinq Pièces
- 1867 Offertoire sur un Noël breton
- 1868 Quasi marcia
- ? Petit Offertoire in C minor (pub. 1885)
- 1890 L'Organiste - 63 pieces arranged in suites

A Brief biography

I doubt whether Ken Russell ever seriously contemplated a film portrait of César Franck. Had he done so, it would probably have made little impact at the box office. The simple facts of his life need not detain us long. He was Belgian by birth, born at Liège in 1822, but was educated and spent almost all his life in Paris. I will try not to refer to him as a French composer, but to all intents and purposes he was. César studied at the Paris Conservatoire, winning prizes and generally distinguishing himself as a pianist, organist, improviser and composer. For nearly forty years he was the titulaire at the church of St.

Clotilde, and was appointed Organ Professor at the Conservatoire at the age of fifty. He achieved little success as a composer until his String Quartet was warmly received at a concert of the National Society for Music, in his sixty-eighth year. A month later he was hit by a pole from a passing hansom in the Champs Elysées and died a few months later in 1890 at the age of 67. As a composer, he was scarcely noticed during his lifetime. As a teacher he was deeply respected and numbered Vincent D'Indy, the songwriter Henri Duparc, and Ernest Chausson among his pupils. He was a simple, devout man, known for his wit and good humour and for the austerity of his life style: he would rise early, setting aside a time for his personal devotions. Most late nineteenth and early twentieth century musical histories either give him passing mention or neglect him altogether.

Ken Russell might have made something of his unrequited love for one of his pupils, Augusta Holmès, but by and large, it has to be said that the life of César Franck was one of routine, his time divided between his teaching, his organ playing and his religious devotions. As Percy Scholes says: "The life of Franck was that of a saint - a 'cheerful saint', as a friend records of him (always crackling with wit and repartee)". He was a child prodigy, but hated the concert platform and, once he was able to be free of the influence of his ambitious banker-father, much preferred the solitude of his organ loft to the wealthy salons of Paris and the concert halls of Europe. There isn't really much else to say about his life, but as with one or two other musical 'still waters' (Bruckner, for instance, comes to mind) they ran exceedingly deep and this quiet, gentle church organist was destined not only to produce music of exceptional power and innovation, but also to exert an influence out of all proportion to his lowly station.

Probing a bit more deeply into the nature of Franck

To try and build some sort of picture of what made Franck tick, we must add to these bare bones of his life, one or two other less obvious facts. We have already mentioned the influence of his father, but to this must be added what Professor Wilfred Mellers describes as "the subtler domination of his no less monstrous wife", the prevailing bad taste in France at the time (more of this anon) and, perhaps surprisingly, Franck's "certain innate lack of intelligence." The irony of Franck's predicament is that he triumphed despite his circumstances, not because of them. Having initially drawn a picture of Franck the saint, we must now try to get behind the mask of sainthood and to uncover the real man. There is ample evidence that he was a deeply passionate man, one might almost say 'hysterical' at times, but that his daily routine forced him to keep this side of his nature severely in check. Mme Franck, like his father, had ambitions for her husband which would be most quickly realised if only he would knuckle down and impress either the salon or the church. (He had dallied with opera early in his career but had found it uncongenial). The fact was, there was money to be made and fame to be won by writing insipid nothings for the church or by impressing the empty-heads of the fashionable salons. To his eternal credit, Franck understood just how moribund the state of contemporary French music was during the eighteen-fifties and sixties. He realised the impossibility of remaining true to his own artistic integrity at the same time as endeavouring to prostitute his abilities in the service of the needs of the moment. Let's take a look at the state of music in the church at the time. The organist at the great Paris church of St. Sulpice was the notorious Lefébure-Wély, purveyor of some of the jolliest, yet most vacuous, music ever composed. His *Sorties* in Eb and Bb are well-known to organists and although they are fun to play and to listen to, they are hardly great music.

There are strong parallels between the Paris of the eighteen-fifties and our own time. We live in the dying years of a materialist society, or at least one in which, for many people, material values have transcended those of the spiritual. During the French Revolution, churches were commandeered and transformed into 'temples of reason' and it was still close enough to the Revolution for composers to be wary of making much distinction between music for the salon and that for the church. As Wilfred Mellers points out, "When in 1858, Franck was appointed organist of St. Clotilde, he deserted the salon for the church, but his music did not radically alter. This was a bad period for, in a materialistic world, the average liturgical work could not be spiritually committed." In fact, Franck wrote little liturgical music at all and, on the whole, that which he did, is not of any particular originality or merit. His well-known setting of the *Panis Angelicus*, for instance, does little to illuminate the text and his music would be equally fitting to a

drawing room ballad, pleasant though it is. Later composers would reach back to the riches of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and rediscover their unique French heritage via the medium of plainsong, but for Franck liberation from the moribund, which it was his lot to inherit, came not from the work of his own countrymen, but from the German tradition. It has often been said that Franck was a child prodigy, but a late developer and it was not until he was into his mid-fifties that a distinctive musical personality begins to emerge. His deepest formative influence was that of the Hungarian, Liszt and, through him, back to Schumann and Beethoven and, forward to Wagner.

There are few examples of composers taking so long to find their individual musical voice, but the reasons are simple, or at least they are to us, with the wisdom of hindsight: Franck was a deeply sensitive, not to say passionate man, who found his natural musical inheritance to be impossible to develop - the lowest common denominator restrictions imposed by the Revolution had broadly the same effect as those imposed by the Russian Revolution sixty years later: music was still regarded as something of a political tool and, for a composer to achieve any kind of popular recognition, he had to bow to the prevailing taste (or lack of it). This, Franck could not do. With one notable exception, the church provided him with little opportunity to provide the kind of sensuous, highly chromatic music which he felt drawn to compose. The exception was his music for the organ. Astonishingly, Franck's reputation rests on just twelve works written for the instrument and three of these date from his final year.

The Organ Music

In his loft at St. Clotilde Franck was master of all he surveyed and here he had a magnificent instrument by the great Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The instruments of Cavaillé-Coll were unlike anything that had gone before, having a rich array of chorus and solo stops enabling the player to simulate the main features of the orchestra. In range of expression the instrument at St. Clotilde was of such versatility that Franck found a liberation and an inexhaustible palette of colours from which to draw for the musical canvases he wished to paint. Cavaillé-Coll has often been called the inventor of the 'symphonic' organ and his instruments, played on by such great musicians as Widor, Vierne, Dupré and Messiaen were to become the foundation on which an entire school of French symphonic music to be built. But it was Franck who first realised the enormous potential of the new resources at his disposal. In 1878, Cavaillé-Coll had built a splendid new instrument for the Trocadéro in Paris and Franck composed three pieces for this rich sounding organ - a unique and strange sound to English ears. What Cavaillé-Coll did was to utilise a system of pneumatic-assisted action (actually invented by an Englishman, Barker) which enabled the keyboards to be coupled together without any undue increase in the weight of the touch. The system also allowed instruments of much greater size to be built since the keyboards could be sited away from the pipes. He also invented a system of stop control called ventilis which enabled the player to set up registrations beforehand and to alter the combinations without recourse to the use of assistants. All this may seem a trifle mundane, but Cavaillé-Coll's inventions were to have as great an impact on organ composition as that of Broadwood on that of the piano. Suffice it to say that his new instruments were sufficiently impressive to draw Franck from the piano to the organ and to enrich the literature of the instrument to a greater degree than any composer since Bach.

At the same time as Lefébure-Wély was writing his bombastic organ music, Franck was composing his Six Pieces for organ. The whole set was played to Liszt at St. Clotilde on April 13th, 1866 at the latter's request. Liszt was clearly deeply impressed and is on record as saying: "These poetic pieces have a clearly marked place alongside the masterpieces of Johann Sebastian Bach." The third of the set is the Prelude, Fugue and Variation, described by Arthur Hutchings as "limpidly beautiful".

By far the longest of the Six Pieces is the *Grande Pièce Symphonique*. Composed between 1860 and 1862 and lasting more than 25 minutes, this is by far the longest of Franck's organ works which is why, presumably, it's played so infrequently (plus the fact that it's extremely demanding to perform!). Its importance lies in the fact that no-one had ever done anything like this before and so it can be seen as the granddaddy of the organ symphonies of Widor, Vierne and Dupré.

I'm very fond of the Six Pieces and, in terms of memorability, depth and musical enjoyment, I think that they are superior to the Three Pieces of 1878. I've always loved the fourth one of the earlier set, the Pastorale. Dedicated to Cavaillé-Coll, this is one of Franck's most intimate pieces: the gentle outer sections encompass an agitated central passage featuring his beloved quiet trompette stop. The final page is magical: Felix Aprahamian describes the repeated octave B's in the treble as 'sounding like a quiet Angelus bell, after which the piece winds down above a tonic pedal to its tranquil close'. There is nothing quite like this in the entire organ repertoire.

The last of the Six Pieces, *Final*, bears an unlikely dedication: 'To my friend Mr Lefébure-Wély' but we have to remember that at the time of its composition, Lefébure-Wély was far better known than César Franck and also organist of one of the main Parisian churches, St. Sulpice, and that the date of the publication of the Six Pieces (1862) was precisely the time when Aristide Cavaillé-Coll was reconstructing the Cliquot organ in St. Sulpice. Be that as it may, in this very jolly movement Franck lets his hair down and comes pretty close at times to the style of the piece's dedicatee. The opening pedal solo is unforgettable and is soon followed by a second solo for the feet. The music is often flashy and it's not hard to imagine the sound of a street organ or to feel that we have strayed into the circus big-top at times. Not often played, but *Final* gives us an opportunity to enjoy a different side of Franck's personality.

Maybe I'm speaking out of turn but I can't honestly claim to enjoy the Trois Pieces of 1878 as much. The Fantasie in A has some fine moments and a stirring opening melody but it seems to ramble at times and is held together by passages which suggest the composer is fiddling about with his registrations. Likewise the often-played *Pièce Héroïque* leaves me a bit cold. The gentle central section is hauntingly lovely (described by a later organist of St. Clotilde, Charles Tournemire, as 'the oasis') but maybe the agitated opening and the huge ending are a bit too 'Napoleonically triumphalist' for English sensibilities!

The real treasure of this set strikes me as the gorgeous *Cantabile*. Not only is this a remarkable feat of musical joinery: it's also one of the most ravishing movements ever written for our instrument. The harmonies are sublime and the melodies just tumble over each other in waves of ecstasy. Listen to the way in which Franck cleverly prefigures the opening melody in the first three notes of the pedal part or the truly amazing canon between the pedal and soprano parts at the climax of the piece. If only he had written in C major, without all the double sharps and if only he had had smaller hands!

Franck's first love was always his beloved Cavaillé-Coll organ at St. Clotilde and it was to this instrument that he turned at the end of his life (as also, strangely enough, did Brahms for his valedictory 11 chorale preludes - his last work). The Three Chorals of 1890 are one of the cornerstone's of the instrument's repertoire. "Before I die, I am going to write some organ chorales, just as Bach did, but with quite a different plan" said Franck. The term implies some kind of prelude built on a hymn tune, but this description is not really of much use in trying to understand how these three works were constructed. The three differ radically from each other: the first, in E major, is the longest and is a continuous variation on the "choral" - a hymn-like melody - stated at the outset, and a secondary, more agitated theme, which eventually forms the work's tiny coda and thus has the last word. The second, in B minor, is a huge passacaglia, built on the ground bass heard in the pedals at the very beginning. There are three contrasting episodes, but in many ways, this is the most tightly constructed of the three. The third, in A minor, is dedicated to the object of his unrequited love, his pupil Augusta Holmès, to whom is ascribed by some the original key which unlocked the furious passion of these late works. Here, the opening arpeggio figure, which at first appears to be of little substance, assumes great importance in the final section, where it is used to accompany a full statement of the choral theme itself whose appearance, unlike its two predecessors, is delayed until the third page of the score. The central passage is a long, unbroken melody, for Franck's favourite oboe and trompette stops. Perhaps it is fanciful, but in this, his last work, there are surely elements of Franck's passion for his pupil, with the central aria a rich love-song. In this context, the final section in which both main themes are heard together in music which is both rhythmically and harmonically restless, takes on an almost autobiographical meaning. Notice, too, the huge build up between the close of the love-song and the final agitato.

If the third choral is the best-known, the second the best-constructed, then the first must take the laurels for containing the most quintessential César Franck. The opening melody proceeds in phrases of great breadth and harmonized with one might almost describe as a quixotic delicacy of touch. The whole work seems to be built as a series of huge arches, each phrase proceeding with a kind of intense inevitability towards the next. This is genuinely the poetry of the organ loft and could only have been written by someone who, Sunday by Sunday, had improvised for the services of the Church. It is astonishing that the very fluidity of this lovely music should have been used by his detractors as a stick with which to beat the composer. "It all sounds like an organist improvising" they say, as if that should be something of which the composer ought to feel ashamed. My goodness, if we could all improvise music like this, music publishers would be out of business in weeks!

It has to be admitted that there are very few of César Franck's twelve original organ works which are simple. All present serious challenges and these are exacerbated by the simple fact that Franck's hands were very large and he frequently asks for stretches which are beyond normal capacity. We can take comfort, though, from Roger Fisher who, despite being unable to stretch more than an octave, was able to perform all of Franck's organ music extremely well. Sometimes this involves a bit of 'faking', sometimes a bit of judicious rearrangement of the notes.

However, there is some good news. In the last year of his life, 1890, Franck compiled a set of 63 pieces for harmonium called simply 'L'Organiste'. The pieces are set out in suites, mostly of seven short movements, according to key and they are much, much simpler to play than any of the organ works. More to the point, they are little treasures and well worth anyone's time to learn, play and enjoy. Whilst not on the same scale as, say, Vierne's set of 24 Pieces in Free Style, they are a good deal easier and, in some ways, more immediately approachable. Particularly lovely is the G major set. Subtitled 'For Christmas time' they are built on some delightful French carol melodies:

L'ORGANISTE nos. 50 - 56:

Poco allegretto
Vieux Noël *Or nous dites Marie*
Noël angevin (1)
Quasi lento
Noël angevin (2)
Allegretto vivo
Sortie

César Franck laid the foundations for a revival of French music after a period when it had all but sunk without trace as a serious art-form and the powerful partnership of Franck and the organ-builder Cavaillé-Coll led directly to the establishment of a school of French organist/composers from Widor, Saint-Saëns and Guilmant, through Vierne and Tournemire to Duruflé, Dupré, Alain, Langlais and, ultimately, Messiaen. This is a considerable legacy.

As a composer in his own right, Franck re-established the integrity of French music after a long period in the doldrums. He took a long time to discover his own identity and, when he did, was forced to accept that he was unable to build on his indigenous tradition and looked instead to the flourishing Teutonic tradition, finding his initial inspiration in the music of Liszt. If his music sounds Germanic, rather than Gallic, it is hardly surprising, although the more one becomes familiar with his highly personal style, the more one realises that it actually sounds more like César Franck than anyone else! He has frequently been referred to as a "poet" and, like most poetry, his music is frequently subtle and only gives up its secrets with familiarity and a little study. Behind the surface passion lies a deeply thoughtful mind: the mind of a man who, unusually for the nineteenth century romantic, is at heart a profound optimist, convinced of his faith and the good purposes of God.

Adrian Self - January 2018