

Alexandre Guilmant (1837-1911)

A brief biography

Félix-Alexandre Guilmant was born on March 12th, 1837 at Boulogne. His father, Jean-Baptiste, was organist at the church of St. Nicolas in the town and by the age of twelve Alexandre was able to deputize for his father. At the age of sixteen he was appointed organist of St. Joseph's, Boulogne and just four years later he became choirmaster at St. Nicolas' Church and a teacher at the Boulogne Conservatoire. His 'Damascus moment', however, was in 1860 when he heard the Belgian organist Jacques-Nicolas Lemmens give a recital at Rouen Cathedral, subsequently playing to Lemmens and receiving an invitation to study with him in Brussels. It's hard for us now to appreciate quite what a sensation Lemmens' playing must have been. He was an austere performer, dedicated to the development of the 'Bach style' and famed for his 'immaculate *legato* playing, capable of endless degrees of variation' which he felt most suited the sustained nature of organ tone.

In 1871, following the death of the *titulaire* Charles-Alexis Chauvet, Guilmant was invited to take up the position of organist at La Trinité in Paris, a post which he was to hold for thirty years, only resigning after a serious disagreement with the church authorities who had arranged for an unfortunate rebuild of the organ whilst he was away on a recital tour in the United States.

In addition to his concert work and his duties at La Trinité, Guilmant was a deeply-loved and highly appreciated teacher at the Schola Cantorum, which he founded in 1894 with Vincent d'Indy and Charles Bordes and, from 1890, at the Paris Conservatoire. The list of his pupils reads like a 'who's who' of French music at the time: Ermend Bonnal, Joseph Bonnet, Nadia Boulanger, Marcel Dupré, Louis and René Vierne as well as countless American students who flocked to study with him.

Guilmant settled in Meudon, a few miles from Paris, where he had a substantial house organ built in 1899 by Charles Mutin, the successor to Cavaillé-Coll and which was eventually inherited by his brilliant pupil Marcel Dupré. Organists came from across the world for his soirées at which Guilmant would play until nearly midnight.

Happily married, Guilmant and his wife had three daughters and one son. Sadly, his wife died in 1909 and he seems to have declined rapidly before his own death on March 30th, 1911.

Guilmant was an enthusiast for the music of earlier generations and with his colleague André Pirro he produced new editions of long-forgotten music by both French composers and those from further afield. (*Archives des Maîtres de l'Orgue* and *l'École classique de l'Orgue*). These collections remain a valuable resource to the present day. Unlike his near-contemporary, Charles-Marie Widor (who rarely played music by composers other than himself and Bach), Guilmant's concert and recital programmes reveal an enormous repertoire of original compositions for the organ. He disliked arrangements and rarely included them in his programmes: don't take my word for this: in an article entitled 'Organ Music and Organ Playing' published in 'The Forum' in March 1898 he is quite emphatic: 'I am utterly opposed to the playing of orchestral works on the organ . . . As between orchestra and organ, each has its great qualities and faults. The organ has a certain solidity of resonance; while the orchestra's resonance is restless, feverish'.

The organ music

Few composers wrote more for the organ than Guilmant. In addition to a large number of short pieces, the bulk of his work divides into six collections:

Pièces dans différents styles

These were written between 1861 and 1892 and published in 18 volumes. Included amongst the 66 numbers are some of his best-known pieces such as March upon a theme of Handel, Grand Choeur in D, Caprice in Bb, Marche Funèbre et Chant Séraphique, Légende et final symphonique and Prière et Berceuse.

L'Organiste Pratique

This set was published in 12 volumes and comprises 55 pieces. They are often more straightforward and less demanding than the previous collection and were originally published in a two-stave version as being suitable for harmonium or organ. The pieces were composed between 1872 and 1883.

L'Organiste Liturgiste

Published in 10 volumes between 1886 and 1899, the 59 pieces in this collection were clearly intended for church, rather than concert or recital use. Many are on two staves and based on Gregorian chants. These are probably the most straightforward of Guilmant's organ compositions.

18 Pièces Nouvelles Op.90

Published in 1904 in six volumes this collection includes the well-known Paraphrase on a chorus of Judas Maccabaeus and the beautiful Lamento in C minor.

Noëls Op.60

Composed in 1884 and 1886 and published in four volumes, the carols on which Guilmant bases his movements come from various parts of France and even Scotland. Many have a liturgical function, being entitled Offertoire, Elévation, Communion and Sortie.

Seven Pieces Op.34, 43 and 77

These were published by Novello, first appearing in *The Organist's Quarterly Journal* of 1869, 1871 and 1875 and *The Village Organist* of 1898. They include the Marche Triomphale in Eb, the Postlude in F, the Berceuse in F and the Fantaisie sur deux mélodies anglaises. (The two 'English melodies' are Home sweet home and Rule Britannia).

Eight Sonatas

These are Guilmant's most complex and accomplished compositions for the organ and, arguably, contain some of his finest music. The first and eighth were orchestrated by the composer and entitled Symphonies no.1 and 2. The second and third are technically the easiest and it is generally considered that the first and fifth are the best.

- No. 1 D minor Op.42. 1874
- No. 2 D Op.50. 1876/83
- No. 3 C minor Op.56. 1881
- No. 4 D minor Op.61. 1884
- No. 5 C minor Op.80. 1894
- No. 6 B minor Op.86. 1897
- No. 7 F Op.89. 1902
- No. 8. A Op.91. 1906

A personal view

My first encounter with Alexandre Guilmant was through his fourth organ sonata. It would be foolish to suggest that this is a great piece of music or even that it represents the composer at his best but, to an aspiring organist, it's an absolute gift because it sounds a great deal more impressive and difficult than it actually is. The opening octave passage, played on enclosed reeds, snarls and the tension builds until release comes with the big tune on full organ. It's all very melodramatic and there are weak passages where the action hangs fire as the composer seems to be fumbling about, but who cares when you can make such a glorious racket?

The ensuing *Andante* is the kind of sentimental movement which would, at one time, have heaped opprobrium on its composer but now serves to demonstrate two of Guilmant's most appealing characteristics: his gift for memorable melody and his sheer charm.

The best movement of the fourth sonata is probably the Menuetto which has both strength and grace. The coda is a fine instance of Guilmant's astonishing capacity for enharmonic sleights of hand. The finale, despite its solemn introduction, is very jolly. The second subject is either tongue-in-cheek or else rather silly, with more than a hint of the infamous L-J-A Lefébure-Wély.

I've chosen to spend perhaps a little longer on this sonata than it probably merits because it reveals so many aspects of Guilmant's musical personality. There is drama, charm, sentiment, humour, melodic fluency, harmonic ingenuity and, above all, memorability. If Guilmant contributes one important facet to the organist's repertoire it is his capacity to stick in the memory. His music abounds in ear-worms!

It was more than ten years before I had another serious encounter with Guilmant. The late Revd. John Stanbury was, at the time I knew him, Methodist minister in Winchester and a very fine organist. It was when he gave the opening recital on a delightful one-manual and pedal pipe organ which he had designed that I first heard Guilmant's little Verset in F. This is the last piece in Book five of 'Pièces dans différents styles' Op. 19 (in some editions it goes by the title of 'Prélude ou Interlude' and in others it is called 'Verset-Fantaisie', but it's the same piece). This is a light-hearted trifle but, like so much of Guilmant's output, it hangs around in the memory.

In the mid-eighties Ian Little asked me to turn his pages and pull the odd stop for him when he gave a recital on the Grove organ in Tewkesbury Abbey. I don't remember all of Ian's programme but I vividly recall his superb performance of Guilmant's first sonata. This is reckoned by many to be Guilmant's finest composition and clearly the composer realised that he had written something rather special as he subsequently orchestrated the work and it became his First Symphony for organ and orchestra. It is interesting to note that Koussevitzky thought sufficiently highly of the symphony to programme it regularly in the 1930's but it then sank without trace until it was revived by Igor Buketoff and the Butler University Orchestra in 1977. The original version for organ solo was also rarely performed which is hard to comprehend given the quality of the music.

The work is in three movements, opening with a strong dotted-rhythm reminiscent of the Baroque French overture which leads directly into the dramatic pedal solo. This is a strong theme and is the first subject in what is a fairly conventional sonata-form movement. The second subject is equally memorable and undergoes a remarkable transformation on its reappearance in the recapitulation where it is heard on full organ. The close-capped entries of the first subject form an intense and deeply satisfying coda to the movement.

The following Pastorale is simply lovely. A duet for the oboe and clarinet bookend a central chorale-like passage for the Vox Humana stop. Any analysis is pointless: this is music to be savoured and enjoyed.

The Final is a barn-storming toccata but with a calmer hymn-like second subject which is magnificently transformed into a blazing coda.

Guilmant's first sonata is not the first large-scale symphonic French organ composition: that honour should probably be awarded to César Franck whose *Grande Pièce Symphonique* (one of the Six Pièces of 1862). Ten years later Guilmant's contemporary, C-M Widor, published his Op.13 set of organ symphonies but these are more akin to suites and lack the symphonic development of the Franck work. I think that it is reasonable to suggest that with his first sonata Guilmant produced a template which others were to follow but rarely with the same degree of inspiration or quality of invention.

The following two sonatas (No.2 in D and No.3 in C minor) are on a smaller scale and, perhaps, less distinguished than the first. That said, though, there is much to enjoy in individual movements and both are a good deal easier than the first. The *Larghetto* of the second sonata is particularly effective and achieves an almost Mahleresque stillness in its two pages.

The third sonata is probably best known for the gorgeously gooey *Adagio molto* (which is the kind of movement which became hopelessly out of fashion for a long time and gave its composer a bad name!). The *Preludio* is strong on rhetoric and sounds a great deal more difficult than it actually is, but ultimately has more of the character of a political speech (albeit a good deal more interesting) rather than a closely argued sonata movement. The finest movement is the concluding Fuga with its dramatic subject.

The fifth sonata is on an altogether grander scale than any of its three predecessors. In five movements (the fourth Recitativo is just one page long and serves as a link between the Scherzo and the Choral and Fugue which follow) it represents a return to the mastery of the first sonata and is arguably its equal (some might say that it is actually superior). Framed by a majesterial opening *Allegro appassionato* and an enormous concluding fugue this is music of profound seriousness. For me, though, the jewel in the crown is the central Scherzo which is by turn agitated and serene but always superbly constructed and deeply satisfying. This is one of the finest movements to come from the composer's pen. The Scherzo kicks off with a passionate upward sweep in octaves while the contrasting second idea (Ex.16). leads back to a reprise of the agitated opening:

There follows a remarkable passage alternating major and minor triads in a manner we are used to associate with the opening of Richard Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*. (The Strauss tone poem dates from the year following the publication of Guilmant's fifth sonata, although it seems unlikely that he would have been familiar with it). The following fugato leads into a reprise of the opening and a powerful coda brings the movement to a close. Incidentally, just because we're dwelt at some length on the scherzo, the rest of this sonata is equally fine and well worth detailed study.

Guilmant dedicated his sixth sonata to his great compatriot, Charles Marie Widor who was now well into his sixty-four years as 'temporary' organist of the great Paris church of St. Sulpice. By the date of the work's completion (1897) Widor had composed all but one of his nine symphonies for organ (the last being the *Symphonie Romane* of 1900) and it is interesting to compare Guilmant's sixth sonata with Widor's *Symphonie Gothique*, completed just two years earlier. Widor's last two symphonies are both technically and intellectually demanding. Both are based on plainsong (the *Symphonie Gothique* on the Christmas 'Puer natus est' and the *Symphonie Romane* on the Easter 'Haec dies') and Widor has entered a profoundly spiritual world. By contrast, Guilmant's sixth sonata is a concert work and, despite the powerful and effective opening *Allegro con fuoco*, he is revisiting familiar territory. Perhaps the best music appears in the beautiful and understated *Adagio* with which the work ends.

The seventh sonata of 1902 is in six movements and has more in common with Widor's early symphonies inasmuch as it is more a collection of pleasant enough movements rather than an organically thought-through sonata structure. Much of its thematic material is a little undistinguished and fails to grab the attention. The one surprise in this sonata is the curious second movement, *Lento assai*, subtitled 'Dreams'. Guilmant's harmony is almost always functional rather than decorative but in this movement he pays homage to his younger compatriot, Claude Debussy (whose music he is known to have admired) and uses harmonies because he likes the sounds they produce, rather than to progress. The opening of

this movement with its string of unrelated dominant sevenths, coming to rest on a whole-tone chord, shows what I mean.

At this point we'll take a break from the eight sonatas and listen to Guilmant's virtuosic *Scherzo Symphonique*. It comes from Book nine of *L'Organiste Pratique* Op.55 and was composed between 1872 and 1883. It's in rondo form meaning that there is a recurring theme which is interposed with a contrasting idea. This would have gone down a storm with his American concert audiences.

After the slight falling-off of artistic aspiration in the sixth and seventh sonatas, the eighth comes as a revelation because in many ways this, the last and longest of the set, stands not only as the peak of Guilmant's achievement but also as one of the greatest sonatas from any French composer. Unfailingly optimistic, it grabs and holds the attention for all of its thirty-five minutes. With scarcely a weak bar from start to finish it's not hard to understand why Guilmant must have realised that he had produced a masterpiece worthy to be orchestrated as his second symphony and dedicated to Joseph Bonnet, one of his most gifted pupils. Nowhere is the composer's contrapuntal mastery so clearly seen as in the final *Allegro con brio*. Guilmant is at the height of his considerable powers as he effortlessly weaves a brilliant fugue around a complex subject, and yet there is nothing academic about his approach. The music bristles with warmth and a deep humanity.

Sadly, the eighth sonata has never achieved the popularity of some of the earlier ones. One obvious reason is that it is considerably more demanding than any of the others; another must be because of its length but, if ever a work deserved resurrection, this is surely a prime candidate. The fourth movement, *Andante sostenuto*, with its hints of Wagner, is a good way to enter the sound world of late Guilmant.

Guilmant's most popular compositions date from early in his life. The March on a theme of Handel ('Lift up your heads') was written in 1861 and The Grand Choeur in D (alla Handel) in 1866. Quite how the composer, with his small frame and tiny hands, coped with the massive chords which abound in both pieces remains a mystery.

From much later in his life comes a charming Berceuse, one of the Four Pieces for Organ Op.77 (also available as one of the Sept Morceaux pour Grande Orgue. Written in 1898. At the opposite extreme to the bombast of the March and the Grand Choeur just mentioned, this lovely miniature could scarcely be simpler and yet it has an affecting innocence and simplicity. Such is the range of Guilmant's rich contribution to the organist's repertoire.

Guilmant's organ works were hugely popular during his lifetime and for a while after his death in 1911, but with the icy blasts from the Second Viennese School and elsewhere, his music was frequently dismissed as sickly or anaemic and effectively disappeared from respectable recital programmes. But then along came the world-renowned concert organist, Christopher Herrick, who recorded the Guilmant organ sonatas for Priory in the mid-eighties and various shorter pieces for Hyperion, thereby giving the composer the seal of respectability which he had lacked for so long. This was followed in 1989 by the landmark EMI recording by the late Catherine Ennis of both the first and fifth sonatas, along with three shorter pieces. Gradually, it became acceptable to include Guilmant on recital programmes once again.

Adrian Self - July 2021