

CÉSAR FRANCK
1822-1890

Cantabile

Of Franck's twelve large works for organ that cemented the French Symphonic style of organ composition, the *Cantabile* is the shortest and arguably the pithiest. A single theme is played three times: once in the soprano range, once in the tenor range, and after a brief buildup, once in canon between soprano and bass, all accompanied by lush chromatic harmony. Beautiful melody, harmonic foray, buildup, and cooling off to a satisfying conclusion – all in only five pages.

Choral in B Minor

The three *Chorals* are so popular among organists to play that the question, "Do you play a Franck *Choral*?" need not be asked of an organist. Rather, the question usually posed is, "Do you prefer the E Major, the B Minor, or the A Minor?" All three are beautiful in melody and harmony, groundbreaking in their use of the organ's tonal resources, and profound in their effect. They capped the beginning of an emerging style of organ composition in France, which later blossomed into the organ Symphonies of Widor and the monumental Symphonies and other pieces by Vierne. In each *Choral*, one can hear an intense reflection on life, on serious music, on the organ's increasing potential as a "symphonic" instrument. The B Minor is characterized by a recurring theme, begun initially in the Pedal. This theme recurs nearly so regularly that the piece resembles a *passacaglia*, but Franck inserts other dramatic and formal devices that render it more of a fantasy. The actual "chorale" is a quiet postlude of sorts that occurs twice, each time closing a main section of the piece, including the very end.

Choral in E

As a composer, Franck was crucial to an ongoing improvement in organ music following the Napoleonic years. Although he was not the initiator of that improvement, his first nine pieces for organ solo did complete the re-establishment the organ as a serious concert instrument. With his final works, the three *Chorals*, the organ finished "growing up," nearly overnight, and the important position of the French Symphonic style of organ composition carried on later by Widor and Vierne was forever secured. All three *Chorals* exhibit an intricate weaving and re-weaving of recurring melodies and motives into increasingly sophisticated textures. The E major, the first of the three, visits and re-visits its own melodies in ever-new guises, strengthening its own foundation and building to one of the most exhilarating and triumphant final flourishes in organ music.

Fantaisie in A

The Fantasy in A major is suitably named. In it several short themes are explored and juxtaposed in the context of a rhapsodic whole. The main theme stated at the outset is the anchor, followed by a more agitated fantasy theme and a plaintive chorale-type theme. Franck's fantasy visits one then another, re-visits part of one then another, hints at one then another, combines two of them in the grand climax, and finally chooses to end with the melancholy theme, now in A minor.

Final

Napoleon's conversions of Parisian churches into "Temples of Reason" sent organ music plummeting into an abyss of trite marches and cheap improvisations on storm scenes. Alexandre Boëly (1785-1858) stands out as one of the few true innovators who finally broke the cycle by composing "real" music for the organ once again. Franck inherited this budding style, and we may now thank him for the rest of the French Symphonic style of organ composition that produced Widor, Vierne and Messiaen and continues today. Franck's music was of a searching nature, an emerging grandeur that sought to expand what the organ and its builders could produce. Franck's twelve large works for organ solo are harmonically rich, the music serious, the forms extremely grand, sometimes sprawling. The exception to this is the Final, which is the least complex of the twelve. There are two distinct themes – one energetic, one majestic. The form is essentially sonata-allegro, frequently punctuated by fanfares based on the first theme.

Pastorale

Pastorales over the years tend to include "storm scenes." Excellent examples are Rossini's Overture to *William Tell*, Beethoven's "Pastoral" *Symphony* No. 6, and the monumental *Pastorale* for solo organ by Jean-Jules Roger-Ducasse. Franck's is certainly pastoral, but its "storm scene" is more in keeping with Franck's reserved style. Franck adds only one stop (a *Trompette*) and creates more of a dripping rain than a deluge.

Pièce Héroïque

Franck was obviously onto something. The perfect storm of post-Napoleonic improvement in church music, the genius of organbuilder Aristide Cavallé-Coll, and Franck's keyboard brilliance brought about what we now refer to as the French Symphonic style of organ composition and registration. Franck was pioneering the use of the organ as a solo yet 'symphonic' (literally 'sounding together', not 'orchestral') instrument. His work was so innovative that he seems to have had

trouble titling two of the larger works! Some of his titles easily indicate a piece's character, such as "Pastorale," "Final," "Prelude, Fugue and Variation," or "Fantaisie." But two pieces gasp for proper titles, having been named "Heroic Piece" and "Big Symphonic Piece." But let us forgive Franck since the music is so enjoyable and so important to Widor and Vierne's later development of the style. The *Pièce Héroïque* is one of Franck's most often played works; it is not too difficult, and it truly is heroic, if somewhat aristocratically so.

Prelude, Fugue and Variation

Franck's works for organ are the prototypes of the great solo organ symphonies of Widor and Vierne. The *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* is a three-part set of melancholy yet beautiful miniatures. The Prelude is a tender aria in B minor for the lovely oboe stop of the organ with flute accompaniment. Its Variation (there is only one) at the end is the same melody with a more flowing accompaniment. The intervening Fugue adds an even greater element of dignity to the poignancy of the other two sections.

Prière

Franck gets much of the credit for bringing the organ out of a Napoleonic slump into its own as a concert instrument. His music explores new ground in the use of tonal palettes, which went hand-in-hand with the new organ building innovations of Aristide Cavallé-Coll. Franck's *Prière* (prayer) is a bit of an anomaly in this ongoing improvement, in that the registration is quite simple and very nearly devoid of any changes during the piece (only one reed and a few couplers come on and off). Perhaps we could consider this Franck's demonstration of the success of a 15-minute piece on a single registration in this beautiful new organ building style.