



César Franck: Complete Organ Works

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RECORD REVIEW César Franck's complete chamber music and organ works

Complete organ music on Audite

The German set of Franck's complete organ music is also invaluable, containing, as it does, quite a few world premiere recordings, and although some of these 'firsts' are short and not particularly significant works, the totality, is well worth the attention of the serious collector. One might (on paper) question the choice of instrument – the 1998 Goll organ of St Martin, Memmingen – but it suits the entire range of music admirably, demonstrating that the 'original instrument in an acoustic familiar to the composer' ritual is not invariably necessary for a full appreciation of this important body of music. The purist may wish for a genuine Cavallé-Coll, but I was entirely satisfied by Ross', choice.

Ross is a fine player and an excellent scholar. Every one of these performances, especially of the great works, has to be taken very seriously indeed: his registration and tempos are admirable, and in the world premiere recordings such relatively important works as the *Pièce en mi bémol* of 1846 we encounter (for the first time on disc) a fine composition which contains more than a trace of the later genius. The *Pièce pour grand orgue* (in A major – demanding four manuals – a work that should be in the repertoire of any self-respecting concert organist) dates from 1854 and the very beautiful quiet coda exemplifies an aspect of Franck that must surely have commended him to Liszt (they knew one another, and on one memorable occasion, each played his organ music to the other composer – a meeting of geniuses many music lovers would have given much to have attended). Ross plays all four published versions of the *Fantasie* (1856, 1863 and two in 1868), a most important juxtaposition of most interest (three of these performances come to within five seconds each – over 12 minutes!), which reveal that all four versions (if properly identified) should each be heard occasionally in recital: the earlier three are not so inferior as conceptions as the more familiar final version.

However, it is the sequence of *Six Pièces pour Grand Orgue* (Opp. 16-21) on the second CD that display the genius of this composer's organ music fully for the first time in his creative life. The Op. 17 *Grand Pièce Symphonique* (the title revised from *Symphonie*) is the first symphony ever written for the organ and this undoubted masterpiece receives a thrilling account from Ross: Liszt and Wagner may metaphorically have glanced over Franck's shoulder during its composition, but it could only have been written by the Belgian. The more lyrical succeeding masterpiece, the *Prélude, Fugue et Variation* is equally finely played. Throughout

these six pieces, from the most 'personal' of Franck's works – the Prière, Op. 20 – to the brilliantly powerful Final, Op. 21, Ross is fully up to the composer's demands, as he is in the concluding masterpieces – the three Chorals from Franck's final months – each one given with commendable artistry, bringing this unique set to a splendid conclusion.

What is additionally significant is the inclusion of all of Franck's music for organ or harmonium, sometimes in important transcriptions by Vierne or others and, whilst individual pieces from these sets may appear little more than chips from the workshop, they make splendid recessional or interludial items for the organist during Mass or other services – and they are all genuine works, short though many of them may be, by this admirable composer. The remaining important set – the Trois Pièces pour Grand Orgue of 1878, which concludes with the famous 'Pièce Héroïque', is equally well performed by the musician who deserves our grateful thanks for bringing to the gramophone every one of the composer's extant works for organ or harmonium.

It must be clear, with such a combination of scholarship and musicianship as has attended the planning and realization of this set, that the result is an issue of which any organist and record company should be justly proud.