



César Franck: Complete Organ Works Vol. III

aud 91.520

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Not long ago I reviewed the first volume in Hans-Eberhard Ross's series of the complete organ works of Cesar Franck (Audite 91.518; July/Aug 2006). These two volumes complete the series: six discs in all. This is claimed as the first really complete recording of Franck's organ works. Many were not published until after his death, and some of only in the late 20th Century. The 12 pieces that constitute the "canon" of the Franck organ works fit comfortably on two discs, so there is twice that much outside the canon, some of it originally for harmonium.

The greater part of Volume 2 is occupied with L'Organiste II, a collection of 43 liturgical pieces written between 1858 and 1863 but not published until 1905. According to the composer's son, they were written for a former pupil who was working as organist in a country church. They are supposed to be suitable for the harmonium, but it is clear that many of them require the pedal division. They are mostly very short—under two minutes—but several are more substantial. These longer works (five to seven minutes long) are mostly offertories, played while the altar is prepared for Holy Communion.

If these pieces were all we had from Franck, he would be barely a footnote in the history of French organ composition. They are obviously meant to be gebrauchsmusik: models to be used and imitated by the student. While they do not represent Franck at his best, there are nuggets of delight among them—especially the pieces intended for Christmas, like the wistful Offertory for Midnight Mass or the Grand Choeur based on the Noel Suisse made famous by the 12th of Daquin's Noels for the organ. One can only wonder whether these pieces give us a taste of Franck's own improvisatory service playing at the time.

In addition to the Three Pieces of 1878, written and performed as part of the inaugural recital series for the Cavallé-Coll organ at the Palais du Trocadéro, Volume 2 includes several other short pieces as well as the last of three versions of the Fantasy in C apart from the "official" version published in the Six Pieces as Opus 16. The two preliminary versions and Opus 16 are recorded in Volume 1 of this series. The version in Volume 2 is the only one dating from after publication. It preserves the opening section of the work but embarks upon a new second movement that includes an evocation of the pedal motive from the first section and builds to a grandiose recapitulation of the work's opening theme, omitting altogether the quiet voix humaine movement that closes Opus 16. Of all the versions, this one is thematically the tightest. Four short pieces for harmonium dating from 1865 to 1880 complete Volume 2.

Volume 3 contains music from the last year of Franck's life. The crowning monument, of course, is the Three Chorales, but more voluminous than these masterworks is the book of 63 liturgical organ works published in 1891, the year after the composer's

death, and sometimes known as L'Organiste I. This title is misleading, since L'Organiste II contains much earlier liturgical compositions. Program annotator Martin Weyer prefers to call the 1891 publication *Pieces pour Orgue ou Harmonium*. Franck died before completing the 100 or more pieces this work was to have contained. In sheer musical quality, these pieces far surpass those of the earlier liturgical collection. In these tiny works we more often hear the authentic voice of the mature Franck. The pieces are carefully organized. Vincent D'Indy claimed that they were intended as music for the Magnificat at Vespers. They are grouped by key into suites of seven pieces: six short versets (under two minutes each) and a longer concluding piece (between four and five minutes). Each suite but the last has an "Amen"—no more than a brief chord progression, and not numbered among the 63 pieces. There are thematic and motivic links in suites. Two of them are designated for Christmas and include quotations of traditional Noels.

The organ is the 1998 Goll in the church of St Martin, Memmingen. It produces a remarkable imitation of the Cavaillé-Coll sound Franck would have had in mind. The acoustic is rich and reverberant. Ross's playing of the canonic Twelve is highly estimable. My only serious complaint is that tempos often seem unduly prodded and phrasing sometimes abrupt. It can sound as if the artist is impatient with the music. I know this cannot be the case, but so often in the Cantabile from the Three Pieces, to take a particularly sensitive example, I feel rushed as Ross moves from one phrase to another. This is a piece that absolutely must aspire to the condition of vocal music—Franck called it Cantabile, for heaven's sake!—and I believe it would sound more lyrical if the player took longer "breaths". In the Three Chorales especially, I long for more rhetorical space in the playing. It would be so effective in the luxuriously reverberant acoustic captured here.

These recordings are obviously intended for listeners who are seriously devoted to Franck and want to hear everything he wrote for the organ. I expect that most general listeners, if they are interested in the Franck organ works at all, will be most concerned with the 12. There are plenty of recordings to choose from. I keep coming back to Jeanne Demessieux's 1959 recordings on the Cavaillé-Coll at La Madeleine, Paris (Festivo 155, 2CD). I have never heard more consistently persuasive readings of these works. Don't be put off by the age of the recordings. Some organists have recorded what I call "12-plus": the canon plus a selection of other works. One of the more attractive is by Louis Robilliard (Festivo 6921.702, 3CD) on two great Cavaillé-Coll organs. Daniel Roth recorded Twelve-plus at three Cavaillé-Colls, including the behemoth at St Sulpice where he is organist (Motette 11381, 11391, 11401). Contrary to documentary evidence of Franck's own rapid tempos in the Six Pieces, Roth takes slow and ruminative tempos for the most part. One of my colleagues described his performances as "sluggish" and "pedestrian" (Sept/Oct 1992), but I hear them as spacious and sensitive. The lesson here is for listeners to hear samples of recordings before committing to purchase. Opinions can differ drastically.