César Franck: The Seven Words of Christ at the Cross

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Donnie Hale
Record Guide

Don't be misled by the packaging. The liner gives the title in German (Die Sieben Worte Christi am Kreuz), but the work is in fact sung in Latin. It comes from 1859, a time when the composer was engaged with liturgical and religious music; in later life he restricted his composition to the orchestral and chamber music he is known for. The Seven Words was, for reasons unknown, not performed during Franck\'s lifetime, and in fact was not discovered until 1977. This performance dates from 1979, shortly after the discovery. Franck supplemented the traditional Seven Words with additional text, both biblical and free. His music is sweet and lyrical, rather Mendelssohnian in flavor (as is so much 19th Century church music), and free from Franck\'s penchant for incessant modulation. The overall effect is meditative, not dramatic, even in poignant sections like \'My God, why has thou forsaken me?\'

The performance is certainly adequate for such a rare work. Most impressive is soprano Edith Wiens, who sounds terrific: full, rich, and expressive. A valuable release, then, for seeing another side of Franck and the state of church music in France around 1860.

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