



César Franck: Complete Organ Works Vol. I

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César Franck's reputation as a composer for the organ rests almost entirely on a mere 12 pieces: the Six Pieces published in 1868, the Three Pieces written in 1878 for the inaugural series of recitals on the Cavaillé-Coll organ at the Palais du Trocadéro, and the Three Chorales of 1890. For many years this canon was regarded as Franck's "complete" organ works, but like Mendelssohn before him, Franck wrote far more for the organ (and harmonium) than his "official" canon, and artists have been exploring this legacy. A fair amount of it was not even published until late in the 20th Century.

The present set is Volume 1 of three (six discs in all) that set out to present "his complete organ works for the first time". Several of the selections here are claimed as premiere recordings. That claim is made for the Piece in E-flat (1846) that opens the first disc of the set, but this was included on a program of Franck's Pièces Posthumes recorded by Joris Verdin and released in 1994 (Arion 68276; Sept/Oct 1995).

The first disc contains the early pieces. Perhaps the best known of these is the Andantino in G minor, published in 1857, and sometimes regarded almost as the 13th piece in the "canon", though it is rather lightweight for that company. A quite substantial Piece pour Grand Orgue dates from 1854, but was not published until 1990. It is not claimed here as a premiere recording. A pleasant set of five miniatures for harmonium written around 1856 was arranged for pipe organ by Louis Vierne and published in 1864. An Offertory in A appeared in a collection of posthumous pieces published in 1905. The first disc concludes with a 'Quasi Marcia', Opus 22, originally for harmonium and arranged for pipe organ by Hans-Eberhard Ross, the organist for the series. These early pieces may not have the stature of the Twelve, but they are not without interest. It is possible to hear hints of the mature Franck in these early efforts, and I would say that lesser works by him are more worthy of attention than even the principal achievements of, say, an Edouard Batiste or a WT Best.

The other two items on disc 1 are preliminary versions of the Fantasy in C, Opus 16, from the Six Pieces. The first version, written in 1856, has the opening section of Opus 16, and this returns at the end as a slightly condensed recapitulation, but the intervening material is completely different. The second version, dating from 1863, has a new opening section, but the rest is essentially the same as Opus 16. There is yet another version written in 1868 – later than Opus 16 – and it appears in Volume 2 of the present series.

Disc 2 contains the Six Pieces. In general, Ross's playing is coherent and thoughtful, avoiding both rigidity and excessive self-indulgence. The program notes make much of tempo in the Grand Pièce Symphonique, Opus 17. A significant discovery in the

1990s was a printed copy of the Six Pieces with metronome markings handwritten by Franck himself. The tempos are all faster than anyone would have expected, and significantly faster than the interpretive traditions associated with Tournemire, Langlais, and Dupré. The notes claim that Ross is observing these authorial tempos. This is true of the fast tempos, but the slower sections are played substantially slower than Franck's markings indicate. The issue is not raised for any other of the Six Pieces, and as far as I am concerned, that is just as well. The rapid tempos certainly make for an exciting performance of Opus 17, though tempo alone will not guarantee real excitement. At the same time a great deal of musical detail is hopelessly lost in the lively reverberation of the room. This is also true of the Final, Opus 21. Here again Ross takes a blistering tempo.

The organ is the 1998 Goll in the church of St Martin, Memmingen. The tone is very dark, dense, and warm – a reasonable facsimile of the Cavaillé-Coll sound that Franck had in mind, complete with that special reedy snarl from full organ. By the end of the second disc, I was becoming very tired of the sound, and this may have more to do with the recording (and reverberation) than with the instrument itself. The tone is so intense that it sounds forced. The pedal especially seems too heavy and turgid for the ensemble.

There is much to admire here, but I am not yet ready to forsake my copy of Jeanne Demessieux's 1959 recording of the Twelve at La Madeleine.