

rambling Virolai from the Montserrat Diptych by Francesc Civil (1895-1990), based on a popular song to the Virgin of Montserrat. Dedicated to two of its monks, it exploits the organ's softer registers before its stirring conclusion. Think Vierne & Widor meet Bridge & Howells, and you will just about have it!

All four discs are a tribute to the skill of the performer, the recording engineers, and the quality of the instruments, and are highly recommended.

### FRANCK: INTÉGRALE DE L'OEUVRE VOCALE AVEC ORGUE, VOL. 2.

Diego Innocenzi (organ), Amandine Lecras (cello), Botond Kostyak (double-bass), Fabrice Pierre (harp), Solistes de Lyon, Jeune Choeur du Centre de la Voix Rhône-Alpes / Bernard Tétu (conductor).

Aeolus AE 10033 (SACD, compatible with CD players)

Playing time: 80'56"

Reviewed by RJ Steve



This production is the second and concluding instalment of César Franck's church music, Volume 1 (AE 10013) having appeared – with the same conductor and many of the same musicians – in 2007. Whereas the previous compilation consisted entirely of shortish tracks, the new one centres upon the long (45-minute) *Messe à trois voix*, which, unusually for Franck, had considerable revision carried out on it. The final 1872 version differs from the 1860 original in containing *Panis*

*Angelicus* (yes, that one), although it is not clear whether Franck himself realised that with this last-named *motet* he had a gigantic hit on his hands. As for the other movements, they vary wildly in standards, and it is surprising how tentative much of this Mass setting sounds. Nor are modern audiences likely to share the rapture that Second Empire congregations seem to have felt when Franck's evocation of heaven's joys causes him to fall back upon almost incessant harp arpeggios. (He and several French contemporaries appear to have concluded that when the going gets tough, the tough get plucking.) One hears the *Kyrie*, rich in potential, and expects the rest of the Mass to be comparably good. No such luck, though the *Agnus Dei* is suitably poignant, and Bernard Tétu and his extremely talented ensemble make the best possible case for all of the work (there have been a few other CD versions, none really satisfactory).

The remaining items have considerable power at their best. *Justus ut palma* – for bass soloist and three-part choir as well as organ – is a world première recording; the sheet music for it was not even published until a few years back. Its most obvious feature is a motive so similar to the one which dominates the Sanctus section of Fauré's *Requiem* that the resemblance cannot be coincidental. Did Fauré hear *Justus ut palma* while visiting Sainte-Clotilde, perhaps? In any event, the *motet* itself, if not one of Franck's finest things, is still agreeable to have.

More consistently impressive are the disc's examples of so-called alternatim sacred composition, in which passages of (accompanied) chant are separated by somewhat longer (though still short) organ solos. The six solos which Franck based on *the Magnificat* have a curiously archaic sound, showing their composer's fingerprints only now and then. They, too, might constitute world première recordings, along with the even finer alternatim pieces which Franck devised for the *Kyrie of a Messe de Noël*.

This *Kyrie*'s immediate genesis is a simple, straightforward, chordal setting by Franck's fellow Walloon, Henri Dumont, who had died in 1684. Franck not only quotes Dumont but makes open allusions in his finale to Louis-Claude Daquin's *Noël Suisse*. In the release's final track, *Sortie* – also new to records, it would appear – Franck cites the same Christmas carol ('*Venez, divin Messie*') that Michel-Richard Delalande had used to moving effect in his early 18th-century *Suites des Symphonies*.

Even now, Franck's stylistic debt to the French baroque is insufficiently appreciated, which makes it all the more congenial to have these unassuming pieces in such unfailingly lovely renditions.

Of special note throughout the present release's vocal contributions (as with Volume 1) is the Gallic pronunciation of Latin. Quite a shock for habitués of England's collegiate choirs, but the ear adjusts to the resultant tang of localism.

This extremely well-filled production and its predecessor are the first SACDs to come my way (well, my family was the last in our Sydney suburb to acquire colour television too) and the overall sound quality, as heard on a conventional CD player, is unpretentiously fine. Even more splendid is the trilingual documentation, which includes not just biographies of the performers, but a full stop-list for the marvellous Cavallé-Coll organ employed (at Saint François de Sales Church, Lyon), and fascinating comments on the actual music's origins. Both volumes come in environmentally friendly packages, mostly comprising laminated card-board. Either or both discs can be ordered online, directly from the manufacturer: [www.aeolus-music.com](http://www.aeolus-music.com). Aeolus (based in Germany, not in France) accepts PayPal, for which relief much thanks.

If you have any enthusiasm for nineteenth-century ecclesial writing you will probably need Volume 2. But do get Volume 1 first.

Franck SACD