

Frank's Sacred Music
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# Beyond *Panis Angelicus*

Franck's sacred music.

By RJ Stove

Nine hundred and ninety-nine of every thousand music-lovers, if asked to name any sacred work by César Franck, would be able to identify only one piece. That piece is, of course, the indestructible – not to say inescapable – *Panis Angelicus*, which has adorned so many weddings in so many nations (quite apart from the dozens upon dozens of recordings on which it has been sung) that if Franck's music were still in copyright, the royalties from this one motet would be keeping Franck's descendants in clover. Even now *Panis Angelicus* can be an affecting experience, in performances which are careful enough to strip away the slushy instrumentations by other hands, and to observe the composer's own clear desire for straightforward dignity. (The advice which Elgar, in a 1931 Pathé newsreel, gave the London Symphony Orchestra before he conducted it in *Land of Hope and Glory* is pertinent to Franck's composition: 'Play this tune as though you have never heard it before.')

It is unfortunate that for almost a century after Franck's death in 1890, the overwhelming renown of *Panis Angelicus* effectively obliterated interest in Franck's other religious

creations. This state of affairs, at last, has begun to change, though more within French-speaking countries (where a fair amount of musicological commentary now exists on Franck's involvement with the Catholic Church) than outside them. One factor was the 1999 release – practically unnoticed in Anglophone lands, save for a terse, belated *Times* Literary Supplement review on 21 August 2000 – of a long and detailed French-language biography by Parisian scholar Joël-Marie Fauquet.<sup>1</sup> Other factors have played indispensable parts: the CD medium's voracious appetite for largely unexplored music which, being in the public domain and requiring only smallish forces, can be committed to disc without undue expense; the auction at Sotheby's, London, of various hitherto unknown Franck manuscripts (not all of them sacred);<sup>2</sup> the printing of several liturgical pieces by Franck in modern critical editions, readily suitable for performers;<sup>3</sup> and increasing

1 Joël-Marie Fauquet, *César Franck* (Paris: Fayard, 1999)

2 Stephen Roe, 'Manuscripts of César Franck', *The Musical Times* (November 1980), pp. 690-691.

3 Richard Benefield (ed.), *Motets for One Voice: The Organ-Accompanied Solo Motet in Nineteenth-Century France* (Middleton, Wisconsin:

levels of critical enthusiasm for the French Romantic organ repertory in general, quite apart from Franck's contribution to that repertory. An hour spent rummaging through old textbooks and through back-issues of organ magazines will confirm that as late as the 1970s, Widor, Vierne, Tournemire, and Guilmant were widely tolerated only on sufferance.<sup>4</sup>

As for why Franck's non-*Panis* sacred output took so long to reach even its current modest level of recognition, there are four main reasons. First, even Franck's own earliest admirers tended to be rather dismissive of it. Second, there can

A&R Editions, 2003).

4 Hungarian-American musicologist Paul Henry Lang, in his long-popular textbook *Music in Western Civilization* (London: Dent, 1942), loftily trashed Widor's symphonies for organ as 'contrapuntally belaboured products of a flat and scant musical imagination, the bastard nature of which is evident from the title alone' (p. 995). From an August 1975 letter to the editor of *Music* (published by the American Guild of Organists): 'Sludge is an apt word to describe Guilmant, Widor and the others ... Franck is probably the best of them, but even his music is overrated' (quoted in Michael Murray, *Marcel Dupré: The Work of a Master Organist* [Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1985]), p. 219). Far from being exceptional, these denunciations constituted, rather, the rule.

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be no disputing that it sometimes fails to represent Franck at anything like his best. Third, because it never obviously subverted 'Victorian' notions of sacred music, it suffered from the general mid-twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon assumption that 'Victorianism' is, and should be, an all-purpose swear-word. Fourth, the impact upon Catholic musical thinking of St Pius X's celebrated 1903 *Motu Proprio* rendered awkward (at least in theory) the position of almost all liturgical music, not only Franck's, written before the *Motu Proprio* had been promulgated.

Vincent d'Indy – the most industrious, the most determined, and probably the most gifted of Franck's followers – quoted with approval, in his famous 1906 Franck biography, the case for the prosecution, as enunciated by his colleague and (from 1896) fellow Schola Cantorum director, the short-lived Charles Bordes. In 1904, five years before dying at forty-six, Bordes passed the following, mostly severe, verdict on his former master's sacred works:

*Franck, who was so learned in all that concerns modern music and that of the eighteenth century, was very indifferently informed as regards the admirable and monumental polyphonic schools of France and Italy in the sixteenth century, editions of which were rare and not very accessible in his day. ... In his Mass [the Messe à Trois Voix, originally dating from 1860, but revised in 1872 to include Panis Angelicus – RJS] of which the Kyrie is an exquisite prayer and the Agnus Dei a gem of musical ingenuity, how shall we qualify the noisy Quoniam tu solus sanctus, which is less worthy of a soloist than of a chorister in rather a merry condition? Side by side with these pages which do no credit to the master, we may place the incomparable opening of the offertory Quae est ista, which is worthy of Bach, and the admirable Domine non secundum, with its counterpoint of a*

*very human kind, and - with the sole exception of the final reprise in the major, which only aims at effect - so sober that this motet might be cited as a model of modern church music.*

Pages such as these fill us with bitter regret that Franck started his career too soon to take part in our movement to reform sacred music. Knowing little of Palestrina, with whose beauties, as he informed me himself, he had only superficially come into contact, and whose religious appropriateness he did not appreciate, as with so many musicians of his generation, his interest stopped short at the writing and artifices of that style of composition. But what would he not have written for the Church if only his noble soul had once been awakened to all the serene beauty of the earlier masters! ... Probably he would have found it difficult not to look within himself and his own music for the elements of expression which would have tempered these liturgical formulae, but what fine art-forms would have been the outcome of these conflicting influences, amid which Franck would have remained, in spite of all, just the divine Pater seraphicus whose ingenuousness and modesty were limitless!<sup>5</sup>

Few readers will have failed to realise that Bordes – writing, it will be recalled, a year after the *Motu Proprio* – indulges in some self-serving here. The clear implication is that Franck would have been a better sacred composer if he had been more consciously antiquarian, more preoccupied with Gregorian chant, and more conversant with Palestrinian polyphony: if he had been, in short, more like Bordes. This might have been true, but is hardly self-evident. Besides, Franck's knowledge of Palestrina was by no means as exiguous as, for whatever reason, he let Bordes believe. He did conduct a few of Palestrina's motets, which few of his

<sup>5</sup> Vincent d'Indy (trans. Rosa Newmarch), *César Franck* (London: John Lane, 1910), pp. 129-131.



French contemporaries could be bothered doing. And the far-reaching contrapuntal instruction which he had undergone as a Paris Conservatoire pupil in the 1830s (above all from his formidable professor Antoine Reicha) left him eminently capable of grasping Palestrina's technical significance, whatever Bordes may have supposed to the contrary.

No, to appreciate the attractions which Franck's motets and other liturgical miniatures can show, it is best to lay aside Bordes's straw-man strictures, and to examine how well the pieces succeed on their own terms. Most of them were what, in twentieth-century Germany, came to be called *Gebrauchsmusik*. Utilitarian in their origin, they resulted from the necessity of providing fresh, not-too-difficult material for the musicians at the three Parisian churches where Franck played the organ: Notre Dame de Lorette, Saint-Jean-Saint-François-au-Marais, and most famously (from 1858) Sainte-Clotilde. (Saint-Saëns and Fauré, when church organists, were similarly required to furnish contributions to the liturgy: and in doing so, to discard, or at any rate to disguise, the dissident nature of their private religious convictions.)

A curious feature that Franck's productions share – and one which cannot have helped the mere score-reader in a library to perceive their virtues – is the way in which they so frequently become much more stirring in performance than they seem on the printed page. In cold type they can appear dull and tame; when actually heard, they are seldom anything of the sort. They have, moreover, their composer's fingerprints all over them. Parry, we are told,<sup>6</sup> used to scrutinise his students' exercises in the hope of finding what he called 'something characteristic,' some evidence of an individual personality operating even in an otherwise inept production. He would not have needed to look far for such evidence in Franck's motets.

Take Franck's strangely desolate-sounding *Ave Maria in G minor* (he set the same words on at least one other occasion), for solo soprano or solo tenor, which dates from around 1865. From the very first phrases it proclaims the authorship of Franck and of nobody else, not least in the steady, crotchet-dominated rhythmic tread (compare it with the *Prière* from Franck's *Six Pièces*), and in the utterly typical repetition (bars 5-8) of a two-bar motive, with a slight but crucial melodic and/or harmonic modification the second time around. The seemingly effortless canonic writing that begins at bar 37, with the modulation into the tonic major, is also a habitual Franck device (of which *Panis Angelicus* supplies an equally impressive example).

Eventually the *Motu Proprio* would crack down on (it would not prohibit) solo singing in thé Mass, thanks to St Pius X's unhappy experiences of Italian churches where soloists inflicted vulgarly operatic coloratura upon congregations. Nevertheless, modern choirmasters wishing to abide by the papal ruling in this matter can always avail themselves of a compromise: the *Ave Maria*

<sup>6</sup> Paul Holmes, *Vaughan Williams: His Life and Times* (London: Omnibus Press, 1997), p. 21.

is eminently singable by a choir's whole soprano or tenor section in unison, assuming either that the choristers can cope with periodic high As, or that a discreet downward transposition of the whole piece can be made. On a recent (2007) CD,<sup>7</sup> the work is given in E minor, with a soprano soloist, and with most of the organ part's right-hand music being taken, very eloquently, by a cello. This confirms the remarkable – almost Grainger-like – flexibility which Franck permitted as regards his church music's scoring. During his lifetime and afterwards, publishers released several of his motets in different arrangements; and while it is not known whether Franck devised any of these arrangements himself, he certainly countenanced them. At times, for instance – as in the consistently noble, oddly English-sounding 1865 *Domine non secundum* for three-part choir – a double-bass is indicated, though in all honesty it does little more than reinforce the lower organ notes, and might as well be omitted if the organ's pedal division is adequate. Elsewhere, such as in the *Quae est ista* (c. 1861) which Bordes somewhat rashly compared with Bach, a solo harp is allowed; there also exists a version of *Quae est ista* demanding a chamber orchestra. These features would subsequently impede the works' chances of gaining post-1903 ecclesiastical approval, though, as with solo singers, the *Motu Proprio* – contrary to what is often assumed – never placed a blanket ban on orchestral instruments as such.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> César Franck: *Intégrale de L'Oeuvre Vocale avec Orgue, Vol. 1*. Diego Innocenzi (organ), Solistes de Lyon / Bernard Tétu. Aeolus AE-10013. In February 2010 a second volume (AE-10033), with the same performers, appeared; it includes the *Messe à Trois Voix* discussed by Bordes. A *Messe Solennelle* which Franck is known to have composed appears to be irretrievably lost.

<sup>8</sup> The relevant passage in the *Motu Proprio* (Tra le Sollecitudini, VI, 15) is: 'In some special cases, within due limits and with proper safeguards, other instruments [than the organ] may be allowed, but

To the Eucharistic text *O Salutaris*, Franck repeatedly returned. He set these words (by Aquinas) for the first time in 1835, the year he turned thirteen. Of more consequence are two versions from the 1860s; one of them is a duet for soprano and tenor (or two sopranos, or two tenors), lasting around four minutes, while the other and slightly briefer setting is for soprano and SATB choir. (Yet another version, of lesser quality, is for solo bass.) Each has its charms, but the duet setting (1862) is the more immediately approachable, being dominated by a suave melody given to three-bar phrases. As with the aforementioned *Ave Maria*, choirmasters worried about infringing St Pius X's dictates can always entrust the vocal lines to choristers in unison.

If anything, the provenance of Franck's non-canonical organ compositions – the compositions, that is, which he did not include in the *Six Pièces* issued in 1868, the *Trois Pièces* of 1878, or the *Trois Chorals* of 1890 – is even more elaborate than that of his motets. In 1900 Tournemire published forty-four shortish organ solos that Franck had written between 1858 and 1863. Whatever Tournemire's merits as a Franck performer on records,<sup>9</sup> there can be no doubt that as an editor he proved less than conscientious, not only retitling some of Franck's pieces and altering the specified registrations, but actively (if covertly) cutting them. Happy to relate, more recent scholarship has rectified the damage that Tournemire's hyperactive blue pencil did; and from such scholarship emerge several solos worthy of much more frequent hearings than they get.

In these solos occur backward glances at a style which one would never expect from the main Franck organ canon: namely, the idiom of

never without the special permission of the Ordinary.' Pianos, percussion instruments, and brass bands are, however, forbidden by the *Motu Proprio* in all circumstances.

<sup>9</sup> *Charles Tournemire: Complete Recordings (1930-31)*, Arbitrator 156.

the grand siècle which had produced Nicolas Lebègue, Nicolas De Grigny, André Raison, Louis-Claude Daquin, Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers, and the two great Couperins. To hear Franck's proud, indeed regal *Offertoire in F Sharp Minor*, for instance, is to be reminded of the striding, imperious triple-time rhythm in Louis Couperin's oft-played *Chaconne*. Or let us consider Franck's *Offertoire pour Messe de Minuit*, where not only is the main theme a seventeenth-century carol of the type employed by Daquin as the basis for variations, but Franck's harmonies so clearly suggest the baroque (give or take one flattened dominant triad near the finish) that the piece could be inserted into a recital of early French organ music without prompting any sense of anachronism. All this is the more notable in view of how completely forgotten the Couperins and their contemporaries were in

Franck's youth. The huge task of making the grand siècle's repertoire – especially its organ repertoire – widely available in print fell to much younger men than Franck: such as Saint-Saëns, d'Indy, Guilmant, and Guilmant's fellow organist André Pirro.

Possibly the foregoing has been enough to hint at some of the pleasures to be found in this still largely submerged area of nineteenth-century religious endeavour. And not from Franck alone: as well as the modern and gratifying CD coverage of Saint-Saëns's previously neglected *Christmas Oratorio and Requiem*, recent performances of Gounod's early *Messe Chorale* for choir and organ (no soloists) have revealed that work to be an outstandingly decorous and severe conception, the Credo of which boasts an organ prelude grim and chromatic enough to anticipate Reger. In short, certain



too-precious-for-words choral conductors who persist in fancying that all liturgical music between Mozart and Vaughan Williams is mere sugary sentimental schlock are in for a chastening surprise.

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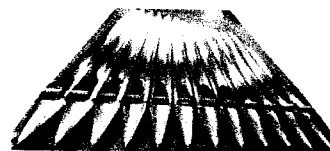
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