

CÉSAR FRANCK - SYMPHONY IN D MINOR

(adapted from Michael Anthonio's article in www.inkpot.com)

The man



Belgian by birth, César Auguste Franck (1822-90) was primarily a composer of sacred music (most notably *Panis Angelicus*) and organ works. He spent most of his life as a composition teacher and organist. He was a deeply religious man and it is reflected in his works. His other major works include a work for piano and orchestra, a violin sonata, a string quartet and a quintet. Besides, he also wrote tone poems, two operas, five oratorios, four piano trios - however they are seldom heard nowadays.

His musical style is quite conservative, looking back to classically oriented composers, especially Bach. However, he was also impressed with the issue of cyclic composition, originated in Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 13 and developed further by Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner. It is a method of composition in which themes are developed from short melodic phrases, then manipulated and expanded throughout the whole composition to bind the work together.

Historical background

For some reason, nineteenth century France disliked the concept of symphony. There were particularly no great symphonies between Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) and this symphony of Franck. So, what possibly inspired Franck to write a symphony, you may ask. The successes of Saint-Saëns' "Organ" Symphony (No. 3, Op. 78) and *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français* by Vincent d'Indy (Franck's pupil) in 1887 did it. Franck's symphony was completed in 1888 and dedicated to Henri Duparc.

The work was given its premiere by the orchestra of Paris Conservatory on February 17, 1889, about a year before Franck's death, and conducted by d'Indy. It was a disastrous performance. The audience proved to be very cold, and the majority of his fellow-composers disliked it. Charles Gounod is even noted to make this famous remark "*It is the assertion of impotence pushed to the lengths of dogma.*" Even until this day, people's reactions seem to be divided into two classes – those who think it is a great work and love it very much; and those who completely loathe it.

Strangely, Franck seemed to be oblivious of his listener's attitudes. He even said to his friend Paul Pojaud, "*What a lovely sound it makes! And what a splendid reception it had!*" while leaving the hall of the first performance.

On another occasion, Louis de Serres asked if the symphony had been inspired by any poetic idea. Franck replied "*No, it is just music, nothing but pure music. At the same time, while I was composing the allegretto, especially the first phrases of it, I did think - oh, so vaguely - of a procession in the olden times.*" Then, aware of the novelty of the work, he added, "*I have been very daring, I know; but you wait till next time, I shall go much farther in daring then!*"

The work

You might have been wondering why people at that time disliked the work very much despite the composer's claim that it was a classical symphony. The answer lies in the fact that it is a controversial work. At the same time, it is both traditional and unorthodox. The complaints of the people, according to Tovey in his famous "*Essays in Musical Analysis*", is because it is far from their expectations of a classical symphony. In addition to that, according to Vallas, the writer of the autobiographical "*César Franck*", one may find weakness in both detail and conception, such as the superfluously extreme recapitulation of the introduction in the first movement, grossly overloaded orchestration and non-effective use of woodwind. However, as described by Vallas, they can be explained by relating them to the organ, since the whole orchestration was clearly derived from the registration on the organ.

The failure was also in some ways caused by the English horn solo in the second movement, which startled many at that time. A professor at the Conservatory was even noted to ask this question to d'Indy "*But my dear sir, who ever heard of writing for the English horn in a symphony? Just name me one symphony by Haydn or Beethoven that uses an English horn! There! So you see: your Franck's music may be whatever you please, but it will certainly never be a symphony!*" without realising that Haydn actually used a pair of them in his "Philosopher" Symphony. Franck's use of English horn also predated by some five years Dvorák's use of the same instrument in the slow movement of perhaps his most recognized work, "From the New World" Symphony (No. 9).

The symphony itself is cast in three movements, an odd item the late nineteenth century. However, there are several good reasons why he did that. First, the old French symphonies of late eighteenth century consisted of three movements, so it is not surprising that Franck, who from the beginning tended towards the past, wanted to revive that ancient custom. Moreover, the cyclic unity that he built works better with the somewhat circular three-movement than with the squared-off four-movement. However, as we will see later, Franck did include all four movement types of standard symphony in his, as the second movement can be seen as a combination of slow movement and scherzo.

I. Lento; Allegro non troppo

This first movement is an expanded version of sonata-allegro, with two distinguished tempi (*Lento* and *Allegro non troppo*). It begins with a variant of a type of phrase that had fascinated composers for more than a century, as Beethoven used it in his F major Quartet, Wagner in his *Ring of the Nibelung* (as the questioning theme of Fate) and Liszt as the main theme of his *Les Préludes*.



This phrase forms a sort of a questioning effect, which continues insistently until the arrival of the *Allegro*. Here, the opening phrase (the question) is transformed into an energetic, aggressive principal theme.



Then, in different key, the whole process is repeated note for note.

The second *Allegro* also brings us the soaring second subject, which subsequently culminates in a grand third (closing) theme, a bright standout in this movement.



It is also the first evidence of the symphony's heroic character. The development continues in the *Allegro*.

The recapitulation brings back the *Lento-Allegro* trade-off. However, this time the main theme of the *Lento* is given in grand fortissimo by full orchestra, while trumpets answering in canon. The movement ends with a positive-sounding coda, as if to answer the question with a blaze of affirmation.

II. Allegretto

The second movement is more a dance rather than a lyric. Combining slow movement and restless *Scherzo* with characteristic Franckian modulations, it tries to redouble the growing optimism started in the end of first movement. Orchestrally-speaking, this is also the most colorful movement of the whole, and the form can be considered a modified rondo.

It starts with soft plucking of the harp and strings. Then, above them, the melancholy melody of the outlaw English horn is launched.



As the movement continues, that melody is in turn given to a clarinet and horn in unison. After a repetition, then comes the first trio, which, according to Tovey, is Schumannesque in style.



After another repetition of the English horn melody and a break, we hear a new theme on strings, which is perhaps best described as "nervous strings", actually a variation of the main theme (the theme of the harp and plucked strings). A second trio, warmer than the first, follows immediately, with the "nervous strings" played as a background.



Then the English horn melody comes back, and leads to the coda.

The coda consists of the two themes of the trios played alternately. In the end, the theme of the first trio concludes the movement in a warm glow of quiet happiness.

III. Allegro non troppo

The form of the finale is a somewhat original version of sonata-allegro form, despite the cyclic form applied. After a six-bar introductory, the opening theme is launched in cellos and bassoons. This is one of the most thematically rich themes of all.



Throughout the movement, themes from first and second movements are recalled as part of the unifying process, most notably the English horn theme of the second, which appears in all three sections of it in grandiose form, and the question theme of the first, mostly near the end of the recapitulation.

The coda is magnificent. Recalling themes of the first movement, it closes with the theme of the finale in a big way, "which can be interpreted as an affirmation of faith after doubt and perplexity, or a message of triumph over adversity, or indeed the triumph of good over evil," wrote David Cox in "A Companion to the Symphony."