

MARCEL DUPRÉ: LE CHEMIN DE LA CROIX OP. 29. AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERFORMER'S POINT OF VIEW

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SUMMARY. The following essay represents an analysis of the work *Le Chemin de la Croix op. 29* by Marcel Dupré. In the beginning of the essay one can find information regarding Dupré's organist and teaching career, his organ works and organ methods. The second section of the essay consists of a detailed analysis of the work mentioned in the title. The analysis offers a structural description of the fourteen movements, with emphasis on their musical content, and commenting on technical aspects and performance issues.

Keywords: Marcel Dupré, organ, stations, movements, form, performance, technique.

Marcel Dupré was one of the most appreciated organists of the 20th century. He had studied the organ at the Conservatoire Supérieure de Paris with Alexandre Guilmant and Louis Vierne, and counterpoint with Charles-Marie Widor. In 1906, he became the *suppléant* of Widor at the Saint-Sulpice Cathedral in Paris, and between 1916 and 1921 he also substituted Vierne at the Notre-Dame Cathedral. In 1934, he became the heir of Widor at the organ of the Saint-Sulpice. Dupré had a remarkable career as a concert organist, sustaining a total of 2179 concerts in different countries around the world. He was famous for his remarkable technique and his infallible memory. In 1920, he gave a series of concerts at the Conservatoire, in which he played the entire oeuvre for organ by Johann Sebastian Bach by heart.

In 1926 Dupré became head professor of the organ class at the Conservatoire, where he followed a teaching career until 1954. Among his most important students were: Jehan Alain, Marie-Claire Alain, Michel Chapuis, Pierre Cochereau, Jeanne Demessieux, Rolande Falcinelli, Jean Guillou, Jean Langlais, Gaston Litaize and Olivier Messiaen. In 1956 Dupré became the director of the Conservatoire, whilst he was also teaching at the American Conservatory of Fontainebleau.

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Aside his impressive career as a concert organist, Dupré dedicated considerable time to his teaching activities, leaving behind a series of methods about organ playing and organ technique, improvisation, harmony, counterpoint and fugue. The methods which are dedicated to organ playing are the following: *Gammes de Pédale pour Orgue* (1924), *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (1925), *Méthode d'Orgue* (1927), *Exercices Préparatoires à l'Improvisation libre* (1937), *Manuel d'Accompagnement du Plain Chant* (1937), *Données élémentaires d'acoustique à l'usage des étudiants organistes* (1937). The volume entitled *Méthode d'orgue* contains two chapters: the first one is focused on organ technique and the second one discusses basic performance issues. It is very interesting that every example given by Dupré in his method is taken from works by Johann Sebastian Bach. Dupré's method is very similar to the ones previously edited by Jacques Nicolas Lemmens and Louis Vierne. At the end of the method one can find a chart in which Dupré reiterates the theory according to which the French organ school originates in the organ teaching of Johann Sebastian Bach²

E.g. 1

Nous rappelons que tous ces exemples, sans exception, écrits en notation figurée, doivent être comparés un à un avec le texte de l'auteur pendant que l'on travaille.

Toutes ces lois doivent être strictement observées, non seulement en exécutant l'oeuvre d'orgue de Bach, mais aussi toute oeuvre écrite dans un style polyphonique, et en improvisant. Tout en étant logiques par elles-mêmes, elles sont traditionnelles, nous venant de Bach par la filiation suivante :

Friedmann et Philippe-Emmanuel BACH

Jean Louis KREBS († 1780)

J.P. KIRNBERGER († 1783)

Christian KITTEL († 1809)

puis :

F.W. BERNER († 1827)

J.C.H. RINCK († 1846)

Adolphe HESSE (de Breslau) († 1863)

ami intime de Mendelssohn, professeur de

LEMMENS (de Bruxelles) (1823-1881)

professeur d'Alexandre GUILMANT et de Ch. M.

WIDOR.

Marcel Dupré, *Méthode d'orgue*

² Dupré, Marcel, *Méthode d'orgue*, p.78.

The largest part of Dupré's work was dedicated to the organ. His compositions include preludes and fugues, works based on Gregorian chants and on protestant chorales, symphonies, suites and program music, such as: *Fifteen pieces for Organ Founded on Antiphons, Versets des Vêpres du Commun des fêtes de la Sainte Vierge* op. 18 (1920); *Seventy-nine chorales* op. 28 (1931), *Sixteen chorales. Le Tombeau de Titelouze* op. 38 (1942), *Trois Préludes et Fugues* op. 7 (1911-13) and *Trois Préludes et Fugues* op. 36 (1938), *Choral et Fugue* op. 57 (1961), *Quatre fugues modales* op. 63 (1968), *Cortège et Litanie* op. 19 (1922), *Variations sur un Noël* op. 20 (1922), *Scherzo* op. 16 (1918), *Suite bretonne* op. 21 (1923), *Lamento* op. 24 (1926), *Sept pièces* op. 27 (1931), *Suite in f minor* op. 39 (1944), *Offrande à la Vierge* op. 40 (1944), *Vingt-quatre inventions* op. 50 (1956), *Triptyque* op. 51 (1957), *Trois pièces* op. 62 (1967), *Symphonie-Passion* op. 23 (1923-1924), *Deuxième symphonie* op. 26 (1929) etc.

An important symphonic work composed by Dupré is *Le Chemin de la Croix* op. 29 (*The Stations of the Cross*) composed in 1931. According to the composers own recollections, the work had the following genesis: „Except for France, which I have travelled through in all directions, I had many concerts in other European countries: in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Holland and in Belgium; in Brussels, an idea had been born, which was to become one of my major works, *Le chemin de la croix*. At the Conservatory of Brussels, a special concert had been organized; the second part of the concert consisted of a short performance of Bach works on the beautiful Cavallé-Coll organ, followed by the *Chemin de la Croix* by Paul Claudel; Mrs. Renaud-Thévenet, a teacher at the conservatory read the texts of Claudel, and after each station I improvised a musical rendering of these texts. This was during the fasting period, on the 13th of February 1931. The reaction of the audience was so good, that the next day, on the train which took us back to Paris, my wife said to me: „I have an idea.” – “Me too.” I answered. “Speak!” – “No, you first.” To put it short, I don't know who spoke first, but the both of us had the same idea: I should compose *The Stations of the Cross*. I have started to work on it, and the next year I played *Le Chemin de la Croix* for the first time at the organ of the Trocadéro.”³

Le Chemin de la Croix is a symphonic poem which is built around several leitmotifs. Each station has its own musical concept and depicts the image of the fourteen stations on the road to Calvary.

³ Dupré, Marcel, *Erinnerungen*, p. 72

Ière Station:

Jésus est condamné à mort (Jesus is condemned to death)

The first station begins with a three-measure recitative, which symbolizes the words of Pilate condemning Jesus to death. The following section dominated by a restlessness and a continuous *crescendo* (marked by the composer *Agitato*), depicts the image of the frenetic crowd. Jesus is symbolised by the descending thirds, whilst the frenzy of the crowd is depicted by the chromatic eighth notes. In the 35th measure a new motif appears in the upper voices, which contributes to the growing restlessness of the music. The tension gradually grows as suggested by the *sempre crescendo*, reaching a climax in measure no. 99, where the composer indicates a sudden *diminuendo*, depicting the image of the distancing crowd.

Due to its tempo (Half note=104), this piece of music presents a series of technical difficulties which can be resolved by practicing small sections in a slow tempo. It is also necessary to have a good fingering which allows one to learn the music faster. The structure of the piece is very clear. The phrases are short, usually 4 measures long. The composer uses only a few motifs which are constantly repeated in chromatic ascents, thus contributing to the restless atmosphere. The stop combinations indicated by the composer are in the beginning R: *Trompette 8'* and P: *Fonds 8'* for the three-measure recitative, followed by G.P. *Fonds 8', 4'*, gradually adding the reeds on all the manuals and eventually reaching *fff* in measure no. 99. The stop changes are made generally when a new formal section begins; for the *crescendi* one can switch manuals and work with the *crescendo* pedals. If the organ is provided with a *crescendo* roll, one can also make use of it to obtain a proper *crescendo* and *diminuendo*.

IIème Station:

Jésus est chargé de la Croix (Jesus receives his Cross)

The second movement depicts the image of Jesus receiving his cross. The music is very suggestive. The stop combination indicated by the composer R: *Fonds 8'*, *Hautbois 8'*, and G: *Fonds doux 16', 8'* creates a sombre atmosphere. The cross is symbolized by the descending fourths in the upper voices, and the heavy paces of Jesus bearing the cross are depicted by the ascending seconds and the Lombard rhythm in the accompaniment. The movement is structured in two similar sections of the same length (I. Measures 1-15, II. 16-31) and a third, conclusive section (Measures 32-39). The music is slowly and constantly ascending, rendering the image of Jesus pacing under the weight of the cross. The sombre character of the music is indicated by the composer with the remark *Lento, pesante* (Slowly, heavily).

IIIème Station

Jésus tombe sous le poids de sa croix (Jesus falls the first time)

The first fall of Jesus is depicted by the first two chords of the movement, after which he stands up and continues his march toward Calvary. His growing agony under the weight of the cross is rendered by the chain of descending seconds, and the *sufferance* motif which appears in the 12th measure. Tensions are built up by the continuous *crescendo* and the constantly ascending music. The agony reaches the top in measure no. 29, after which, starting from measure 35, the music returns to the initial atmosphere. Once again, the music is very suggestive; one can genuinely feel the pain and anguish of the Lord suffering under the weight of the cross. After a long rest in measure 41, the theme of *redemption* follows in *pp*, ending the movement in a peaceful atmosphere.

IVème Station

Jésus rencontre sa mère (Jesus meets his mother)

The fourth station is perhaps the most beautiful. The pain of the Virgin Mary is symbolized by the beautiful theme in the soprano, accompanied by a chain of descending seconds in the lower voices, which depict her weeping. The stop combination with R: *Flute 8'* and P: *Voix célestes* also contribute to the sorrowful atmosphere. The main difficulty of this movement is to maintain the tranquillity of the music, which mirrors the pain of the mother suffering in silence.

Vème Station

Simon le Cyrénéen aide Jésus à porter sa Croix (Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the Cross)

In this movement, Jesus is depicted by the descending eighth note motifs in the left hand, whilst Simon the Cyrene is symbolized by the syncopated motifs in the upper voices. In the beginning, the *cross* motif can be found in the bass line, and starting from measure no. 35 it can also be found in the soprano. The motif appears first in the soprano, and then, with a half note delay, it appears in the bass line. In measure no. 63, the motifs in the soprano and the bass line overlap, depicting the image of Jesus and Simon the cross together. At the end of the movement the music returns to the initial atmosphere.

Regarding technical aspects, this movement is rather challenging due to the fact that from measure no. 34 the left hand has to play difficult passages in *legato*, which can lead to the straining of the hand. However, this problem can be solved with proper relaxation techniques and practicing slowly.

VIème Station

Une femme pieuse essuie la face de Jesus (Jesus and Veronica)

The 6th station presents the image of Veronica who rushes to Jesus and washes his face. The musical motif which symbolizes her *compassion* is found in the upper voices, accompanied by a chromatic dialogue of eighth notes in the left hand. In measure no. 19, a descending version of the *cross* motif appears in the bass line, followed by a new motif in the upper voices and several interventions of the *compassion* motif. The movement ends with the theme of *redemption*, the *Voix celestas* indicated by the composer creating a *heavenly* atmosphere of tranquillity.

VIIème Station

Jesus tombe à terre pour le deuxième fois (Jesus falls a second time)

Just like the 3rd movement, the 7th station begins with the fall of Jesus. The following music depicts Jesus as he marches on bearing his cross. Although the tempo is still *Moderato assai* (Quarter note=60) like in the 3rd movement, this time the music is more agitated due to the accompaniment which consists of a chain of chromatic anapaests and sixteenths, depicting the angry crowd marching with Jesus. Similar to the 3rd movement, there is a long *crescendo* which leads to a climax, followed by a *decrescendo* and a lengthily descent of the music. The movement ends in *pp*, with the chain chromatic of anapaests and eighth notes in the pedals.

VIIIème Station

Jésus console les filles d'Israël qui le suivent (Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem)

After the sorrowful music of the previous movements, the eighth station brings a moment of serenity. The music is in F major, and for the first time it's diatonic, completely lacking chromatic elements. This also contributes to the brightness of the music. In this choral-like movement one

can hear the theme which depicts the sorrow of the women of Jerusalem in the soprano, together with a new theme on the Récit manual, symbolizing the words of Jesus, who comforts them.

IXème Station

Jésus tombe pour la troisième fois (Jesus falls a third time)

The 9th station presents once again the wrath of the crowd accompanying Jesus to the Calvary, depicted by a series of descending sixteenths in a very fast *tempo* (Quarter note=132). In this movement, the composer uses musical materials from the previous movements (Stations no. 3 and 7). After a continuous rise of the music and a perpetual *crescendo*, the third and last fall of the Lord is symbolized by a fast passage of descending sixteenths. After a long rest, the movement ends peacefully, symbolizing Jesus, who accepts his destiny.

This movement is actually a *toccata* which demands an infallible technique from the performer. The structure is very clear; the phrases are determined by the length of the theme found at first in the soprano, and later on in the middle voices. To improve practice efficiency, one can practice the sixteenth motifs in chords. This way one can learn the music faster, and understand the harmonic structures of the movement.

Xème Station

Jésus est dépouillé de ses vêtements (Jesus is stripped of his clothes)

The 10th station depicts the image of Christ being stripped of his clothes. Due to the constant *staccato* and fast tempo, the character of the music suggests a *scherzo*. The chromatic descending motifs in the left hand remind one of the laughter of the people who mock Jesus. The music is restless (*Allegro agitato*) and constantly ascending and descending. The sound of the stop combination indicated by the composer (G.P.R. Gambes 16', 8', 4') also contributes to the horrid atmosphere. The second section, marked *Moderato* (Quarter note=88) is a moment of tranquillity, which can be interpreted as Jesus resigning to the will of God.

From the technical point of view, this movement also demands a very good technique from the performer. The constant *staccato* and the fast tempo pose several problems which can only be solved through thorough practice. Once again, the eighth note groups can be practiced in chords in order to understand the harmonic structure, and for faster learning. The accuracy of the *staccatos* can be ruined if the hands are strained; therefore, it is necessary to relax the hands in order to obtain a precise performance.

XIème Station

Jésus est attaché sur la Croix (Jesus is nailed to the Cross)

The movement is dominated by the sound of the hammering which nails Christ to the Cross. It is conceived in *Tutti*, with the tempo indication *Lento pesante* (Quarter note=56). The movement consists of two similar sections. The theme which depicts the suffering of Jesus appears in the midst of the hammering in the upper voices, rendering a musical image of the agony of Christ being nailed to the cross.

XIIème Station

Jésus meurt sur la Croix (Jesus dies upon the Cross)

The first section of this movement presents the seven last words of Christ on the cross. The composer indicates the stop Voix humaine 8' to symbolize the humanity of Jesus. The theme exposed on the Récit manual paraphrases the words: *Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?* (*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*) In the second section the composer depicts the image of the ground which shook after Jesus died on the cross, indicating a long *tremolo* in the bass line. The stop combination with Fonds 32', 16', in the pedals and Fonds 16', 8' in the manuals create a rumbling sound which imitates the shaking of the earth. After a massive *crescendo* followed by a sudden *diminuendo*, the movement closes with a calm section in which the composer uses the motifs presented in the first section.

XIIIème Station

Jésus est détaché de la Croix et remis à sa Mère

(The body of Jesus is taken from the Cross and laid in Mary's bosom)

The 12th station depicts the image of Christ who is taken from the Cross and given back to his mother. The constant flow of eighth notes symbolizes the descending of the body from the cross. The second section of the movement presents once again the beautiful theme which depicts the pain of the Virgin Mary, presented for the first time in the fourth movement.

XIVème Station

Jésus est mis dans le sépulcre (The body of Jesus is laid in the tomb)

The last movement begins with a funeral march in *crescendo*, which brings back the theme depicting the sorrow of the women of Jerusalem, who are mourning Jesus. After several interventions of this theme, after a short *crescendo* and *accelerando*, the suffering motif of Jesus is brought back in the upper voices. The funeral march is resumed in the 3rd section of the movement, accompanied by a series of chords and repeated notes in the bass line, which contribute to the sorrowful atmosphere. The work ends with a section in *Adagio*, with the stop combination Voix célestes and Flûte 4', which create a *heavenly* atmosphere. The music depicts the image of Jesus Christ resting peacefully in his tomb, giving the world the hope of resurrection.

In the process of studying and performing Dupré's *Le Chemin de la Croix* it is of great importance to have a very good technique which allows one to carry out difficult passages accurately and with ease. As Dupré himself suggests in his organ methods, one has to have a technique similar to the one mastered by pianists. One of the biggest difficulties of this work is posed by its duration which exceeds one hour, and demands a great deal of concentration from the performer. It is however better to read the corresponding texts by Paul Claudel between the movements. That way the organist has more time to relax and focus on the next movement, and the audience has the possibility to understand the music better.

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