

CÉSAR FRANCK'S GRANDE PIÈCE SIMPHONIQUE OP. 17 AN ANALYSIS FROM THE PERFORMER'S POINT OF VIEW

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SUMMARY. As mentioned in the title, the following work contains the analysis of one of the most important works of César Franck and of the French organ literature, the *Grande pièce symphonique* op. 17. In order to realize a proper performance of this monumental work it is necessary to run through a series of structural, technical and performance issues which are essential in the process of understanding Franck's organ music. The following analysis is structured in two main parts: the first part discusses the form of the work emphasising its main structural sections, whilst the second part handles the performance and the technical problems regarding articulation, dynamics, tempo and style.

Keywords: César Franck, organ symphony, form, structure, dynamics, tempo, articulation, phrasing

The organ works of César Franck have been created under the influence of the symphonic music characteristic for the Romantic Movement which flourished during the 19th century. According to Norbert Dufourcq's statements, Franck was a pioneer by adopting the new symphonic style: "*Being a creative musician, César Franck introduced the organ to an unexplored field. Through his compositions, the symphonic music had entered the domain of church music; a completely new concept characterized by a colourful language with rich harmonies, an intimate relationship between the composer and the performer, the music became a mirror which reflects the joy, the sadness and the exaltation of the musician.*"² A special place in the organ works of César Franck is held by the work entitled *Grande pièce symphonique*, the first composition for organ created in the symphonic genre.

Dedicated to Charles-Valentin Alkan (1813-1888), *Grande pièce symphonique* was composed in 1863, being published within the volume entitled *Six pièces* in 1868. César Franck was the one who performed the work for the first time at the Cavaillé-Coll organ of the Sainte-Clotilde Church in Paris, on the 17th of October 1864.

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² Dufourcq, Norbert, *La musique d'orgue française de Jehan Titelouze à Jehan Alain*, p. 148

With regards to the genesis of the work, some sources indicate a possible relation between the *Grande pièce symphonique* and Franz Liszt's *Fantasie und Fuge über den Choral Ad nos, ad salutarem undam* which had been composed in 1850³. This theory is however disproven by the fact that the latter named composition by Liszt had been performed for the first time in 1878 during a concert performed by Camille Saint-Saëns at the *Palais de Trocadéro*. Another possible influence is the *Symphony for solo piano* Charles-Valentin Alkan, the first symphonic work dedicated to the piano⁴.

Regarding the formal structure of the *Grande pièce symphonique*, the opinions among the musicians who had analysed the work differ. For example, in his biography dedicated to the life and work of César Franck, Charles Tournemire states the following: “*The Grande pièce symphonique is basically a sonata; the divisions are distinct: Introduction and Allegro non troppo e maestoso – Andante – Allegro (in the spirit of a scherzo) – return to the Andante – Several references to previous material, and then a broad conclusion. The piece might be considered as the first “romantic” sonata conceived for organ.*”⁵ On the other hand, in his book entitled *Playing the Organ Works of César Franck*, Rollin Smith⁶ draws the attention upon the fact that in the first edition of the work published by the Maeyens-Couvreur Edition, one can find the following four part structure indicated by the double bar lines marked by the composer:

1. *Andantino serioso – Allegro non troppo e maestoso*
2. *Andante – Allegro*
3. *Andante – Allegro non troppo e maestoso*
4. *Beaucoup plus largement și fuga finală*

It is interesting that Franck had inserted a double bar line between the *Allegro* section and the second *Andante*. Normally, after a first observation one would consider that the *Andante*, *Allegro* and *Andante* sections belong to the same structure conceived in a *lied* form (A-B-A). In this sense, the logic of Tournemire is more plausible, but in order to realize a proper analysis, one must firstly take into consideration the markings made by the composer. Although the composer delimits four main parts within the work, as in case of a symphony, he avoids giving the title *Symphony*, choosing to use the adjective *symphonique*. The term “symphonique” refers to the length, orchestral sound and cyclic form of the work.

³ Smith, Rollin, *Playing the Organ Works of César Franck*, p. 80

⁴ In 1857 Charles-Valentin Alkan had published a volume entitled *Douze études dans tous les tons mineurs* op. 39, in which numbers 4, 5, 6 and 7 are the four movements of a piano symphony - Smith, Rollin, *Playing the Organ Works of César Franck*, p. 81

⁵ Tournemire, Charles, *César Franck, Organ music – Smith, Rollin, Towards an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*, p. 85

⁶ Smith, Rollin, *Playing the Organ Works of César Franck*, p. 80

The first part envelops the introductive section *Andantino serioso* and the *Allegro non troppo e maestoso* in the form of a sonata. At the beginning of the work the composer presents first a theme with an orchestral stop combination characteristic for the organ works of César Franck: foundation stops on all the manuals and the Hautbois 8' form *Récit* with all the manuals being coupled. The first phrase of the theme is followed by a choral-type phrase which has the role of a conclusion (Img. 1). From the 10th measure the theme is presented again, followed by an extended version of the conclusive phrase. The rhythmic freedom is signalled by the composer from the very beginning of the work, by means of the following indications: *rallentando*, *quasi ad libitum* and *a tempo*.

Ex. 1

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 1-8⁷

From the 21st measure the theme is transferred to the voice of the bass, and then to the line of the tenor. In the 35th measure the right hand switches to the *Grand Orgue* manual, adding the 16' foundation stops and the reeds form the *Récit*. After obsessively repeating the same musical motif, sustained by a long *crescendo*, the tensions accumulated during this first section lead to a fist culmination point in measure 50. The length of this introductive section foretells the volume of the following work. The single most important performance issue in case of this first section is the rhythmic freedom which has to be handled very carefully, always taking into consideration the initial *tempo* indicated by the composer, avoiding an exaggerated *rubato* which can harm a structured performance.

⁷ <http://conquest.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

The transition to the next section marked *Allegro non troppo e maestoso* is made through a long *crescendo* carried out on pedal point. The composer indicates the following: *ajoutez successivement les jeux d'Anches à chaque clavier de façon à arriver graduellement au Grand-Choeur* (Gradually add the reed stops such as to arrive to the Grand-Choeur sound). Such a *crescendo* is easily made on a Cavaillé-Coll organ since they are equipped with separate pedals for activating the group of reed stops, called *Appels*. After reaching *ff*, the composer presents for the first time the main theme of the work (Img. 3) which reminds one of the famous *fate*-motif from the *String quartett op. 135* by Ludwig van Beethoven (Img. 2). The cyclic structure is made through the repeated statement of the main theme and the secondary themes throughout the work.

Ex. 2

DER SCHWER GEFASTE ENTSCHLUSS.

Grave. **Allegro.**

Muss es sein! Es muss sein! Es muss sein!

Grave ma non troppo tratto.

p *p* *p* *cresc.* *f* *cresc.* *f* *cresc.* *f*

B. 52.

Ludwig van Beethoven, *String Quartet op. 135*, Part 4, Measures 1-6⁸

Ex. 3

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, The Fate Motif, Measures 60-63

⁸[http://sausage.whatbox.ca:15263/imglnks/usimg/7/78/IMSLP04770-Beethoven String Quartet No.16 Dover.pdf](http://sausage.whatbox.ca:15263/imglnks/usimg/7/78/IMSLP04770-Beethoven_String_Quartet_No.16_Dover.pdf)

The main theme appears for the first time unaccompanied in the bass line. Following this first statement, the fate-theme appears successively in the other voices. The following *crescendo* leads to another intervention of the theme on the *Grande Orgue*, accompanied by a series of marked chords, played in *non-legato*. This march-like section ends suddenly, being followed by a choral-like section. Between measures 165 and 170 one can observe a new stop handling technique, the reed stops being activated on long pedal points, imitating the entrance of the brass section within the symphonic.

Ex. 4

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Mesures 158-170⁹

In measure 179 the composer brings back the *Quasi ad libitum* phrase presented in the introductive section of the work. The motifs found at the end of this phrase are then worked out in the following section of triplets (Ex. 5).

⁹ <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

Ex. 5

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 174-183¹⁰

This section presents several technical difficulties caused by the fast *tempo*. The thematic interventions necessitate a special attention from the performer. The music develops in *pp*, with small *crescendos* carried-out with the swell pedal. In order to render the intentions of the composer properly, this section needs to be played with a specific ease and no fluctuations of tempo. The first part of the work ends with a choral-like section and a last statement of the *quasi ad libitum* phrase.

The second part begins with an *Andante* section in B major. The sound world of this section is a special one due to the *Cromorne* stop indicated by the composer for the solo line, a traditional French stop which can also be found in the French organs of the classical period. The accompaniment develops on the *Récit*, with the same combination of foundation stops and the Hautbois. The stops of the *Grande Orgue* manual are coupled to the pedals. The music is simple yet charming, carrying the listener into a peaceful state of mind. A possible performance problem in this case is maintaining the calm atmosphere which can be disrupted by the frequent change of manuals.

After this short serene moment another quick-passed section follows in *b* minor - *in the spirit of a scherzo* – a technically difficult section with fast sixteenth note passages which have to be played in *legato* (*trés lié*). This *Allegro* is the only section in which Franck does not indicate dynamic changes. The stop combination is a bit strange, the composer indicating *Flute 8'* and *16'* on the *Positif*, combined with the *Flute 8'*, *Hautbois* and *Clairon 4'* from the *Récit*. Both hands play on the *Positif* and the swell pedal is closed. The

¹⁰ <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

sound created by this combination resembles the sound of a reed organ. In the 83rd measure a new melody is brought in the line of the pedals, with the indication *cantando* (Ex. 6). This short phrase appears in a dialog between the bass line and the soprano.

Ex. 6



César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 78 -93¹¹

The most significant difficulty in the performance of this section is maintaining the *tempo*, the constant flow of sixteenth notes inducing a permanent state of unrest. The best solution for resolving this problem is to practice the section in a slow tempo for a long period of time. Playing by heart also contributes to a confident performance of this section.

The third part of the work begins with the re-exposition of the *Andante* section, this time built as an echo with the *Voix céleste* stops indicated for both manuals. In the 23rd measure the composer brings back the main theme of the work, followed by the recapitulation of the secondary themes. This section reminds one of the beginnings of the last movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony in which the composer handles the same way.

After several dynamic changes and long *crescendo* doubled by a *rallentando* followed by a quarter note rest with a fermata, the last part begins with the exposition of the main theme in the line of the soprano and the tenor. The march-like character of the music is made by the marked chords played on the manuals and the series of eighth note passages found in the bass line. The tonality of *Fa #* major also contributes to the festive character of the music.

¹¹ <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

Ex. 7

Beaucoup plus largement que précédemment

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 71-82¹²

This section gives the performer the opportunity to display his/her virtuosity. The *tempo* indicated by the composer *Beaucoup plus largement que précédemment* (A lot slower than before) might create confusions, since in the section meant by the composer the measure was *alla breve*. In any case, the performer needs to choose a tempo which allows him/her to comfortably play the eighth note passages and obtain a structured rendering of the theme exposed in the upper voices.

At the end of this section the music stops on a dominant chord followed by a whole measure rest. The following fugue is based on a theme derived from the main theme of the work.

Ex. 8

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 101-108¹³

¹² <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

¹³ <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

In the 139th measure marks the beginning of the Coda, where the composer indicates the addition of the *Octaves graves* stops on all manuals, thus increasing the sound volume one last time. From here on the main theme is repeated obsessively and the music is under a constant modulation, reminding one of the Wagnerian style. The tensions built up during this modulatory section are released in the last culmination point of the work in measure 181 (Ex. 9). The end of the work measures up with the end of an orchestral symphony, a long *ritardando* taking place, activating the entire *sound reservoir* of the symphonic organ.

Ex. 9

César Franck, *Grande pièce symphonique*, Measures 182-193¹⁴

Regarding the performance of this work, one must always have in mind the aspects regarding articulation, dynamics, phrasing, tempo and style. When it comes to articulation, this works, the same as the other compositions of Franck has to be performed in *legato*. As Alexandre Guilmant once had said, *legato* is “the real manner”¹⁵ to play the organ. In order to obtain this *legato* one needs to use several technical methods such as finger substitutions or finger sliding from one key to another. Practicing these technical elements is all the more necessary since Franck, having very large hands, didn't hesitate to include large intervals into his music, which create serious difficulties to the performers. In Franck's music one can find a performance method characteristic to the French symphonic organ music, called *note commune*, which means that when two similar notes appear successively in two different

¹⁴ <http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/d/d5/IMSLP03781-Grandpiece.pdf>

¹⁵ Guilmant, Alexandre, *La Musique d'orgue*, *Encyclopedie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire*, Deuxième Partie, p. 1157

voices, one does not need to repeat the second note, it being treated as a rhythmic *legato*. This performance method also contributes to the making of a tight *legato*. Every technical aspect regarding manual playing is also valid in case of pedal playing. Although Franck did not indicate any pedal applications, during the performance of his works one must use both toes and heels. Many times the right foot needs to manoeuvre the swell pedal to carry out the dynamic elements, in which case the left foot needs to take over the notes which would normally be played by the right foot. In order to obtain an ideal articulation for the interpretation of the organ music of Franck it is necessary to find a comfortable fingering with which one should practice the difficult sections for a long period of time. In some cases one can adopt solutions like taking over the notes of one hand to another, or transpose notes an octave higher or lower, or play with the same hand on two different manuals at the same time. In order to resolve these technical problems one needs to maintain a relaxed position of the body, the hands and the feet, which have to be always in contact with the keys and pedals of the organ.

In case of the organ works of Franck, the aspects of phrasing, dynamics, and tempo and stop combinations go hand in hand. Just like Guilmant and Widor, Franck indicated orchestral stop combinations for larger sections. He did not like to change the stops too often. In case of his works a *crescendo* can be carried-out as follows: first one activates the 8 foot foundation stops of each manual, combined with the *Hautbois* from the *Récit*, the manuals being coupled together; one gradually opens the swell pedal and successively adds the reed stops of the *Positif*, the *Grande-Orgue* and the *Pedals*. The sound obtained at the end of such a *crescendo* is the equivalent of the orchestral *Tutti*. In case of solo sections, Franck often indicates the *Cromorne*, the *Trompette* or the *Hautbois*, and in case of meditative sections he indicates the *Voix céleste* or the *Voix humaine*. His stop combinations are simple and somehow standardized, which makes it all the more difficult to play them on a non-symphonic organ, in which case the performer might be compelled to realize a *crescendo* or a *decrescendo* by adding or removing stops. This procedure is wrong, since any obvious entrance of stops can ruin a structured performance.

The aspect of the *tempo* represents a special problem in the performance of the works of Franck. In case of the *Grande pièce symphonique*, just like in case of all the other organ works, the performer has to deal with the issue of rhythmic freedom. The degree of this freedom is unknown. Adolphe Marty, one of Franck's students stated the following: "One cannot imagine how freely Franck played his own works"¹⁶.

¹⁶ Jaquet-Langlais, Marie-Louise, *The Organ Works of César Franck: A Survey of Editorial and Performance Problems, French Organ Music from the Revolution to Franck and Widor*, p. 170

On the other hand, Franck did not like it if his students played his works too freely: „In time! He ordered in a sonorous voice those who, wanting to do the right thing, wrongly tried to imitate him and interpreted his own works too indulgently.”¹⁷ However, the performer must always be careful not to exaggerate with the *rubato* which could lead to a misinterpretation of his works.

Regarding their style, Franck's works were born under the influence of the German composers Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Robert Schumann, Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner, from whom he had adopted his special interest for constant modulations. Because of the seriousness of his music, the French public who was used to a more charming and flamboyant style didn't always receive his works with enthusiasm.

After a detailed analyse of the *Grande pièce symphonique* one can conclude that due to its cyclic structure and its stylistic and performance aspects it represents the quintessence of the Franckian oeuvre. One can without a doubt state that it represents the link between the sonata and the symphony genres, standing as a bridge between the French and the German arts of organ music.

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¹⁷ De Serres, Louis, *Quelques Souvenirs sur le Père Franck, Mon Maître*, in: Smith, Rollin, *Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*, p. 181

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