

## CHARLES MARIE WIDOR'S *GOTHIQUE* AND *ROMANE* SYMPHONIES – THE SPIRITUAL STATEMENTS OF A GRAND COMPOSER

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**SUMMARY.** In the following work I tried to present the last two symphonies composed by one of the greatest representatives of the French symphonic style: Charles Marie Widor.

**Keywords:** Charles Marie Widor, *Symphonie Gothique*, *Symphonie Romane*, analysis

The *Symphonie Gothique* op. 70 and the *Symphonie Romane* op. 73, are the last two of the ten symphonies for the organ composed by Charles Marie Widor. After he had finished the eighth symphony, Widor had decided that he would no longer compose any music for the organ, but that he would commit himself to the orchestra. Still, as his aesthetic views toward organ music had developed, after long years of observations and research, he decided to dedicate two more symphonies to this instrument. The two works, composed in Widor's late years, share a very complex musical language, and they were both dedicated to two of France's most beautiful cathedrals: Saint Ouen in Rouen and Saint-Sernin in Toulouse.

According to the historical sources, the *Symphonie Gothique* was composed for the inauguration of the Cavaille-Coll organ of the Saint-Ouen Cathedral in Rouen. According to the concert program, the symphony had not yet been finished at the time the inauguration took place, but only a few fragments of the latter work were presented: "*Magnificat: Versets, fragments d'une symphonie gothique composee pour la circonstance par M. Widor.*" (According to the program from: "*Les Cahiers de Marcel Dupre*" III, Hg. Stephane Detournay, Tournai 1991, page 39). After the inauguration, Widor worked on the Symphony for another five years, and presented all four movements in 1895, on the Cavaille-Coll organ in Saint-Ouen. The work is meant to be a musical tribute to the monumentality of the 127 meters long and 32 meters high cathedral constructed in the gothic style.

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The first movement presents a “massive” musical world which reminds of one of the cathedral’s monolithic structures. The tempo indication *Adagio* also indicates the solemn character of the upcoming music. The eight note theme from the beginning of the movement, repeated in various ways, and the chromatic musical language paraphrase the stone ornaments and long arches and columns of the gothic construction, and even the musical writing seems to reflect its shapes.

## Ex. 1

## The shape imitating theme from the first movement

Moderato Charles-Marie Widor

**R Columns**

*p* *cresc.*

**Ornaments**

GPR

The movement begins in *p*, with a relatively simple musical material, suggesting a distant view of the cathedral. After the original theme is repeated twice, a transitioning part follows, which introduces a second motif. After this transition, the original theme is introduced again in g minor, and afterwards combined with the second motif and a new percussion-like motif of repeated chords. After a long chromatic descent in the pedals, the music modulates to the key of *F major*, followed by a chromatically ascending episode, and a long crescendo, which slowly draws the listener gradually closer, and finally Saint-Ouen appears in its whole grandiosity. At this culmination point, the original theme appears in the bass, whilst the upper voices sustain it just as the columns sustain the gothic vaults. The music is very suggestive, the *fff* indicated by the composer and the ground shaking chords in staccato literally paint a musical picture of the giant edifice. Widor himself gave it the following motto: “*en souvenir de Sainte-Ouen de Rouen*” (*A souvenir from Saint-Ouen*).

After this point, the initial atmosphere slowly returns by a continuous decrescendo and a chromatic descent, which leads again to the original theme, in this case in the soprano, accompanied by the second motif in the pedals and the percussion-like motif in the left hand. The stop combinations - which are relatively simple ones (*fonds et anches*) - and the manual changes indicated by the composer along the movement also contribute to the unity of the music. In the coda, the original theme is brought one last time in the bass line, augmented and accompanied by a very simple musical material, altogether creating a calm atmosphere, suggesting a distant remembrance of the eternal cathedral.

**Ex. 2**

**Climax of the first movement, with the original theme in the pedals**



The second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, in opposition with the first movement, is a very serene and intimate music, which transports the listener to the interior of the cathedral at the moment of the communion. The simple musical line found at the beginning in the soprano, registered with a soft 8' flute stop, induces a contemplative state of mind. Although the music appears naïve, it has a tremendous effect on the listener and on the performer as well. The accompaniment reminds of one of the beautiful lights inside the cathedral created by the large stained glass windows.

**Ex. 3**

**The theme of the second movement and its accompaniment**



At the end of the second page, there is a short transition toward an interlude in *f* that combines the initial theme, now appearing in the tenor, with a new musical motif in the soprano. After this short interlude, another

transitioning episode brings us the last part of the movement, where the first theme blended together with the second theme and its accompaniment brings us back to the initial calm atmosphere.

The third movement is a scherzo-like fugue with a very long theme. The chromatic and modal musical material, and the unexpected turns of key create a very special atmosphere, reminding the listener of the beginning of the holy mass. On the third page in the 14<sup>th</sup> measure, the Gregorian Christmas Introit *Puer Natus est Nobis* appears in the bass like a pedal-cantus-firmus. Suddenly the one who listens is transported to the medieval times, hearing the monks intoning: *A child was born for us*.

Ex. 4

The Christmas Introit *Puer Natus est Nobis*

The musical score is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It begins with an 'Intr.' marking and a '7.' indicating the measure number. A large 'P' (Piano) dynamic marking is placed at the start of the first line. The lyrics are written below the staff, aligned with the notes. The score consists of several lines of music, with some lines ending in double bar lines. The final line of the score is 'E u o u a e.'.

Intr. 7.  
**P** U-er \* ná-tus est nó- bis, et fí- li- us dá-tus est  
 nó- bis : cú-jus impé-ri- um super hú- me-rum é-  
 jus : et vocá- bi-tur nómen é- jus, mágni consí-  
 li- i Ange- lus. *Ps.* Can-tá-te Dómino cánti-cum nó-  
 vum : \* qui- a mi-rabí- li- a fé- cit. Gló- ri- a Pátri.  
 E u o u a e.

The stop combination indicated by Widor (*cornets et mixtures – brilliant sounds*) also suggests the festive atmosphere. The Gregorian plainsong appears three times along the movement, and the last time in an augmented version, coupling the Grand Orgue to the pedals and also adding the 16' and 8' Trompettes, thus once again reinforcing the festive character. The culmination point is suggested by a chord in *sf*, introduced by a passage in *accelerando*, which breaks the boundaries of the bar. After this point, the initial fugue theme is presented one last time, as a transition to the coda of the movement, where the bar is changed to 4/4. After the restless, continuously changing

and tensioned music, one would expect a different kind of ending, but the composer chose a surprisingly plain musical material, abruptly finishing the movement with a *G major* chord.

**Ex. 5**

**The culmination point and the coda of the 3<sup>rd</sup> movement**

Culmination

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The top system is a piano introduction, featuring a complex, fast passage in the right hand, with a 'Culmination' label above it. The bottom system is a 'poco a poco allargando' section, featuring a 'trumpet' part and a 'ff' dynamic marking. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The fourth movement of the symphony is divided into five parts of variations (*Moderato-Allegro-Moderato-Andante-Allegro*), each containing the Gregorian theme from the third movement, which in this case is also divided in three parts (*1. Puer natus est nobis./ 2. Et filius datus est nobis./ 3. Cujus imperium*). The five parts are so different, that one could say that they do not belong to the same movement. The first part of the movement incorporates three variations: a choral like variation – bars 1-18 - with the first two parts of the Gregorian melody in the soprano, a monody – bars 19-45 - with the first two parts of the Gregorian melody in the tenor like a recitativo, and a canon – bars 46-93 – with the first two parts of the Gregorian melody in the soprano and the bas. All three variations are modally harmonized, with strict counterpoints and rhythms. The accompaniments imitate the sound of the church bells. In the second variation, the composer introduces a new theme, which appears over and over again, as a reply to the Gregorian motif. The second part of the movement is a fugato using a chromatic musical language and unexpected twists and turns, which eventually lead to the third part in

moderato, which presents a complex musical material based on the third part of the Gregorian melody, as a continuation of the first choral-like segment. The fourth part is a trio based on the first part of the Gregorian theme, which ultimately leads to the last part of the movement, the toccata. The repeated notes in the soprano and the two notes repeated in the bass line remind us of church-bells. On the fifth page in the fourth bar, the increasingly repeated theme from the first part of the movement appears again. The movement is continuously in crescendo, and at the climax the Gregorian melody appears once again in *fff*, doubled in the bass line, transmitting a state of exaltation to the listener.

Ex. 6

**The climax of the last movement, with the Gregorian theme doubled in the bass line**

The musical score consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system shows a treble and bass staff. The treble staff has a *fff* dynamic marking and contains a series of eighth notes. The bass staff also has a *fff* dynamic marking and contains a series of eighth notes, mirroring the treble staff. The second system continues the same pattern, with the treble staff showing a series of eighth notes and the bass staff showing a series of eighth notes. The score is marked with 'GPR' and '8'.

The long passages and the chords remind of the columns and the vaults of the cathedral once again. After this tremendous sound storm, tranquillity returns with a fairly sudden decrescendo, and again a coral-like coda, which confers unity to the movement and leaves the listener in a peaceful state of mind.

The *Symphonie Romane*, dedicated to Saint-Sernin, the largest Romanesque church in Western Europe, is an even more adequate example of Widor's spirituality. Whilst in the Gothic Symphony only the last two movements are based on Gregorian plainsong, the *Symphonie Romane* is entirely dedicated to it. Albert Schweitzer, a famous musicologist and a good friend of Widor

who once said “When one May Sunday, still striving with technical problems, Widor played for the first time in St. Sulpice the *Symphonie Romane*, I felt that in this work the French art of organ playing had entered the sacred art. and I had experienced the death and that resurrection that every art of organ playing must experience when it wishes to create something enduring.”

The symphony is based on two Gregorian themes: *Haec Dies quam fecit Dominus* (This is the day the Lord has made) and the Easter Graduale *Victimae paschal laudes* (Let us praise the Easter lamb).

## Ex. 7

The Gregorian Plainsongs: *Victimae Pashcali laudes* and *Haec Dies*

Grad.  
2.  
h

Aec dñ- es, \* quam fé-cit Dó-  
mi- nus : exsulté- mus,  
et lae-té- mur in é- a.  
¶. Confi-témi-ni Dó- mi- no, quó-  
ni- am bó- nus : quó-ni- am in saé-  
culum mi-se-ri-cór- dí-a \* é- jus.

Seq.  
1.  
V

Ictimae paschá-li laudes \* immo-lent Christi- á-ni.  
Agnus re-démit oves : Christus inno-cens Patri re-conci-  
li- ávit pecca-tó-res. Mors et vi-ta du-él-lo confli-xére mi-rán-  
do : dux vi-tae mórtu-us, regnat vivus. Díc no-bis Ma-ri- a,  
quid vi-dísti in vi-a? Sepúlcrum Christi vi-véntis, et gló-  
ri- am vi-di re-surgéntis : Angé-li-cos testes, sudá-ri- um,  
et vestes. Surré-xit Christus spes me- a : praecédet su-os in  
Ga-li-laé-am. Scimus Christum surrexisse a mórtu- is ve-re :  
tu no-bis, victor Rex, mi-se-ré-re. A-men. Alle-lú-ia.

The first movement begins with an improvisatory introduction, where the *Haec dies* theme appears in the left hand in dialog with a free musical material in the soprano, a passage rising through two octaves leading to an *f* *sharp*. The free dialogs between the two voices, using the stop combination indicated by the composer – shiny mixtures – create a luminous atmosphere. One can say that this part prepares the listener for the upcoming music. The improvisatory character of the introduction is also indicated by the remark of the composer: *Quasi recitativo, espressivo, a piacere*, which leaves the performer to do virtually anything with the music, of course within the limits of good taste.

## Ex. 8

## The improvisatory introduction of the first movement

Moderato (♩. = 76)

R.

f

Quasi recitativo, espressivo,  
G.P.R.

ff

a piacere

After the introduction, the theme is brought again in an augmented version in the pedals, accompanied with a musical material derived from the first rising sixteenth quavers from the introduction, ultimately leading to a first culmination point in *ff*, when the theme appears twice, the second time as an echo on the *Recitativo*. Now an episode in *C sharp major* follows, with a complicated, chromatic musical material and a second theme in the tenor, followed by a long flow of sixteenths and several representations of the plainsong. The streaming music ultimately leads to a rather Wagnerian climax, when the theme appears in the pedals, doubled, accompanied by an ever-moving sixteenth passage. The music is once again very suggestive, but this time it has a truly symphonic aura. One can virtually see the symphonic orchestra, as the brass section plays the plainsong theme, accompanied by the constant movement of the strings. After this climax, the volume of the music slowly drops through a long stream of modulations after which the second theme returns in *D major*.

The first movement ends quietly, just like in case of the *Symphonie Gothique*.

The second movement, *Choral*, begins with a chorale-like modal musical material, with the plainsong theme in the soprano. Just like the choral of the *Symphonie Gothique*, this music has also a religious character. In the fifth bar of the movement, under the last chord of the manualiter chorale, a new melody develops, which shall appear several times along the movement. After this introduction, the second line of the plainsong *Quam fecit Dominus* is presented in the soprano, accompanied by an ostinato bass-line. The following *più-vivo* improvisatory section leads to a culmination point, which constitutes a bridge toward a very serene part of the movement, where the plainsong theme



appears augmented in the pedals, accompanied by the second theme in the soprano and a flow of broken chords in the left hand. This beautiful section, where the composer literally plays with the plainsong motifs, ends quite suddenly. After a short *general pause*, the *Haec Dies* motif returns again in *D major*, and finally the second theme appears for the last time in the home key of *F major*, accompanied by the ostinato bass-line from the beginning of the movement. The movement ends in a coda containing reminiscences of the presented musical materials.

The third movement, the *Cantilene* in a *minor*, presents a new plainsong theme *Victimae paschali laudes*, which appears after a short introduction. We could say that the theme is "hidden" in the surrounding music.

## Ex. 9

## The hidden "Victimae paschali" theme of the Cantilene

Plainsong theme

The musical score is presented on four staves, organized into two grand staves. The top grand staff contains the soprano and alto lines, while the bottom grand staff contains the tenor and bass lines. The plainsong theme is written in the soprano line, starting with a 'p' (piano) dynamic and a 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking. The theme is characterized by a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems, with the first system containing the first two measures and the second system containing the next two measures. The first measure of the first system is marked 'p' and the first measure of the second system is marked 'pp'.

It is very difficult for the listener to spot it, because it is the first note *e*" (which should actually be an *e*') is tied to the *e*" from the previous bar. The second section of the movement, *un poco agitato*, presents the third line of the plainsong (*Agnus redemit oves*) twice again. After this choral-like median part, the first musical material returns again, thus obtaining a plain A-B-A' form. At the end of the movement, there is a coda, which presents the *Victimae paschali* theme one last time in the alt. The *Cantilene* is the only movement written on four staves, which raises a few technical difficulties, since in these conditions it is quite hard to play in legato. The tempo and stop

combinations indicated by the composer contribute to the lyric character of the music. The sound of the soft *fonds* and *prestant* combined with the clarinette solo create a very calm and intimate sound world.

The last movement, the *Final*, is once again very dynamic, just like in case of the *Symphonie Gothique*, comprising musical materials from the first three movements. It begins with a monophonic toccata-like representation of the *Haec Dies* theme in *fff*.

### Ex. 10

#### The monophonic *Haec Dies* theme at the beginning of the last movement



During this first section, the theme appears several times, accompanied by musical materials with contrasting rhythms, altogether creating a highly complicated chromatic sound storm, which sometimes quiets down, and other times dramatically intensifies. One can say that the movement is like a series of waves, because there is not only one climax, but also several ones. Already in the nineteenth measure, there is a first culmination in *fff*, when the theme returns for the third time in its original form of equal length notes, sustained by long chords. After this point, an episode follows, containing traces of the *Haec Dies* theme. Under these figurative passages, the plainsong is introduced again as a *cantus firmus* in the pedals, followed by another transitioning episode, where the composer plays with smaller motifs of the plainsong, eventually reaching another culmination point. Following this point, a harmonic descent takes place, which leads to another incursion of the *Haec Dies* theme, but this time in *p*. This part continues with yet another crescendo toward a new introduction of the plainsong in the pedals, followed by a new episode and a dynamic descent toward a rapid ostinato of sixteenths above which the *Haec Dies* theme develops again, reminding one of the musical materials

from the first movement. This transition culminates in a chorale-like section, followed by the true climax of the movement, where the plainsong is presented like a hymn with long chords. The movement ends with the same arabesque motif as the one found at the beginning of the first movement, followed by a distant echo of the *Haec Dies* theme. One can say that in case of this last movement, Widor pushes the possibilities of the harmonic world to the very edge, creating something truly remarkable. It is also very interesting that both symphonies end quietly; some people say that this is because Widor was quite old when he composed them. Nevertheless, I think that they would not have the same effect if they were conceived differently.

In conclusion, I would like to live with Widor's own words, whose opinion regarding organ music is the best way to describe these two masterpieces: "*a special kind of music of the eternal, awakening thoughts of immortality*".

(Translated by Bognár Noémi)

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